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COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

あなたを探しに

今野緒雪



集英社

Volume 27

In Search of You

Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary's garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field's greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

If you've lost something, I'll go with you to search for it. Thinking that you've just carelessly set it aside, and wanting to take possession of it once more.

If you've lost sight of yourself, I'll search in your stead.

If you search for me, I'll smile and say, "Here I am."

And if you tell me you can't remember what it is you're searching for.
I'll stay by your side until you remember.

Warrior Demands a Response

Part 1.

The alarm on Mami-san's wristwatch noisily sounded.

Game over.

Time was up for the treasure hunt.

The participants had already started to assemble in the courtyard. Although they couldn't hear Mami-san's alarm, they'd come because they could each tell the time with their own watches.

4:40pm.

The individually tiny voices and laughter joined together and knocked on the outside of the room's glass window, like a wave breaking upon the shore.

Everyone was waiting for the results to be announced.

However.

Here, in the room on the second floor of the Rose Mansion, it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

The events that had taken place during the last few moments had been so hectic that it took a while for comprehension to catch up.

Either that, or everyone's mind had gone blank as they struggled to think of how to control a situation that was as chaotic as someone upending a toy-box, scattering toys everywhere.

Let's sort out what happened.

First off, at 4:35pm, Rosa Chinensis (Ogasawara Sachiko-sama), having waited until the time was ripe, ordered the holder of the red card, Rosa Chinensis en Bouton (Fukuzawa Yumi), to, "Stand up."

Just as Yumi was in the process of standing up, Matsudaira Touko-chan, who until that moment hadn't set foot in the Rose Mansion at all that day, burst into the room with incredible force, looking for all the world like a person possessed.

"Yumi-sama, won't you take me as your petit soeur?"

All the students around them had been surprised, but the most surprised had to be the person being addressed herself. It's said you can never really know another person, but Yumi had asked Touko-chan to be her soeur previously, and been refused. On top of that, she'd been attacked by Touko-chan once more the previous week, albeit as part of a completely incomprehensible conversation, and the subsequent cold shoulder had not really garnered her any sympathy.

Some kind of misunderstanding had obviously arisen between them. Therefore a refusal would be soon forthcoming, and then a wait for the blood that had obviously gone rushing to Touko-chan's head to recede so that the misunderstanding could be sorted out and the tie between them cut. It shouldn't take too long. The surrounding students decided to settle themselves.

And yet, Touko-chan had come sprinting, door-slamming, panting and leaping in front of Yumi as though something had happened.

It seems reasonable enough that surprise would reach Yumi's face before happiness or any other emotion.

Then, without thinking, she stood up. That was when the red card made its entrance. As a result of spending the last hour wedged between the chair cushion and Yumi's backside, it was warm from her body heat.

"Ah."

And that was when the alarm went off on the wristwatch worn by the head of the newspaper club, Yamaguchi Mami-san.

Well, what to do now.

Somebody, take control. Of this situation.

There was somewhere between twenty and thirty (no time to take an accurate count) students watching on, holding their breath.

At that point.

"It's 4:40pm. The treasure hunt has ended, so would all the participants please assemble in the courtyard. I repeat – "

The voice came from the school's PA system.

"Ha."

Hidemi-chan's voice sounding through the speakers brought everyone back to reality. Hidemi-chan had been scheduled to make the announcement from the broadcasting room in place of her onee-sama Mami-san, who couldn't move from the event's headquarters, that is, the Rose Mansion. Of course, her watch was synchronized with Mami-san's. The approximately ten seconds delay was probably due to confusion about how to use the equipment in the broadcasting room.

"This is no good. We have to get out there."

Mami-san called out. In other words, what would happen if the promoters were late? She still had the important task of announcing the results ahead of her.

"Everyone, to the courtyard, quickly."

Having calmed down, the other students heeded these words and broke for the biscuit door. Rosa Gigantea en Bouton (Nijou Noriko-chan) who was today playing the role of assistant, dashed out carrying three baskets full of bite-sized chocolates that were prizes for participation.

Things moved fast. Like watching an emergency evacuation.

However.

"One moment."

Sachiko-sama called Mami-san to a halt.

"There's just one thing I want to confirm. What do you plan to do about the red card?"

"Ah..."

Yoshino-san's yellow card had been found by Tanuma Chisato-san. Shimako-san's white card hadn't yet been claimed, so a winner would be chosen from amongst the absentee entrants.

However, what of the red card?

It was only just within the time limit, but the red card had made an appearance. However, while it had "made an appearance" there had been no specific person that had come forth, card in hand, and said, "I've found it."

In truth, the red card was even now still atop the cushion, although it had probably cooled down slightly.

"Well ... "

Mami-san started to speak, but then closed her mouth.

If multiple people found the card at the same time, the winner was supposed to be impartially decided by rock-paper-scissors. But did that mean that chance was granted to all participants in the room, with the exception of Chisato-san. But then there were those who were at point-blank range, and those who were further away and only found out about the card later, and various levels in-between, so it couldn't just be decided by calling everyone together and having them all play rock-paper-scissors.

If, just after 4:35pm, Yumi had stood up when Sachiko-sama had asked her to, then the red card would unquestionably belong to Sachiko-sama. But, with the arrival of Touko-chan, the situation became more complicated.

"It's Touko-chan's, right?"

Sachiko-sama said.

"Uh."

Upon hearing these unexpected words, everyone caught their breath simultaneously. Sachiko-sama hadn't stopped Mami-san to press her own claim.

"But, even if you say that *Rosa Chinensis*."

"It's true that I asked Yumi to stand up. But even though she started moving, she remained seated. It was Touko-chan that made her stand up."

The participants who had been entertaining a slight hope despondently filed towards the door. Someone with a far stronger case than they had just renounced her claim. With that, there was no way it would be overturned.

"Yumi-san."

Mami-san turned around and called her name. Seeking confirmation that this was acceptable.

Yumi nodded.

Just like Sachiko-sama had said, Yumi had started the process of getting out of her chair, but she had still remained seated. It had been the shock of hearing Touko-chan's words that had caused her to stand up.

If it had been someone other than Touko-chan, Yumi probably would have accepted. But it was Touko-chan, so nothing more complicated needed to be considered.

"Then hand the red card to Matsudaira Touko-san. We'll handle the formalities later."

Mami-san spoke quickly, as she made a dash for the biscuit door.

"Okay, everyone out."

In accordance with that order, everyone quickly left the room like commuters exiting a train during rush-hour. Yumi started walking in the opposite direction, opposing that flow.

She could see both Touko-chan and Sachiko-sama, but they were too far away that she couldn't reach out to either of them.

Part 2.

"Testing, one, two."

Mami-san said, speaking into a megaphone. Despite departing in such a hurry, Mami-san strode purposefully into the courtyard with her demeanor conveying, "I've emerged at precisely the appointed time," and exuding the impression, "Everything is going according to schedule," as she stood in front of the participants. The slight hoarseness in her voice just added to the charm.

"This is the deadline for anyone who has found a card to come forward."

The three future Roses, that is Yumi, Yoshino-san, and Shimako-san, stood beside Mami-san. The members of the newspaper club, who had been scattered around the school during the treasure hunt, had also resumed their positions in the courtyard. Only Hidemi-chan, who had gone to the broadcasting room to make the earlier announcement, was nowhere to be seen.

"In that case, I shall announce the results."

When Mami-san said this, all the chattering students stopped their conversations and looked towards the front.

"This year, two of the treasures, the bouton's cards, were found."

This caused a bit of a stir. Those who already knew this result and those who were hearing it for the first time listened carefully to what came next. The red flush that was visible across their faces probably couldn't be explained solely by the setting sun.

Of the three, two were found – which meant that one was still undiscovered. That kind of result probably gave rise to agitation within the primary participants.

"Would those people whose name I call please step forward."

Losing out to the surrounding tumult, Mami-san raised her voice as she spoke into the megaphone.

"The first card found was the yellow card. It was claimed by Tanuma Chisato-san, from the second-year chrysanthemum class."

Both applause and gasps of surprise came from the crowd. That was understandable. Chisato-san had claimed the yellow card last year, and followed it up with a repeat performance this year. So this was the second consecutive year she'd achieved this remarkable feat.

From amongst those excited voices Chisato-san calmly made her way to Mami-san's side, her face showing she was eminently pleased with the reaction she was getting.

"Good grief."

Yoshino-san shook her head, as she too moved. In the event that a card was found, the holder of the card would stand next to the victor. That had been arranged and agreed to beforehand.

"Congratulations."

"Thank-you."

The interview began.

"I'll start by asking how you're feeling about being the first person to find a card."

"I'm really happy."

The interview proceeded at a surprisingly brisk pace, because at some unknown point in time Mami-san's megaphone had been swapped for a microphone. Since Hidemi-san could be seen hunched over walking away from Mami-san with the megaphone under her arms, the obvious inference was that she'd borrowed the microphone from the broadcasting room and brought it with her. – What a commendable *petit soeur*.

"And where did you find the yellow card?"

"On the exterior wall of the staff room."

As expected, there was a stir from the audience, and even some booing. The explanation that was given earlier in the room on the second floor of the Rose Mansion would have to be repeated.

"The exterior wall of the staff room? Is that correct, Rosa Foetida en Bouton?"

Of course, Mami-san had anticipated this reaction from the crowd and calmly continued the interview.

"Yes. That is correct."

Yoshino-san agreed.

"But I can hear a number of people saying that the staff room was out of bounds."

Then, Yoshino-san and Chisato-san both looked immensely self-satisfied as they simultaneously said:

"The inside was."

Neither of the pair said anything more, instead only smiling broadly. In the end, it fell to Mami-san to settle things once more.

"If you look at the maps you were given, I think you'll all understand – "
Much thanks for all your hard work.

Mami-san then asked Chisato-san if she had any final statement, handing the mic over to her.

"If this treasure hunt event is held next year, naturally I'll be aiming to get the yellow card for a third year running. When that happens, club president, I'd like my name inscribed on a roll of honor, so that future generations know of my deeds."

High-school was three years. So, short of repeating a grade, a record of three consecutive victories could never be broken. Of course, this year the middle-school students had been allowed to enter in the form of the "absentee's chance draw," but that should probably be viewed as a special case since it didn't involve actually walking the grounds and searching for yourself.

"It's a deal."

Mami-san's assurance was met with much cheering and applause. In reality, a miraculous string of three consecutive victories was unlikely to happen, but everyone present was all fired up.

"Okay, moving on to the red card, which was found only moments before time was up."

Silence fell over the courtyard.



"After consultation, Matsudaira Touko-san, from the first-year Camellia class, was declared the winner."

At that instant.

The ground shook as though there were an earthquake. Unheralded, thunder rang out. A sudden gust of wind rocked the school walls. – Of course, none of those things actually happened, but they're good metaphors for the roar of voices that reverberated around the courtyard.

The sound of all different voices clashing together made a noise that was hard to believe could come from humans. Those few moments of sound encompassed cheers of joy, angry roars, shrieks, and applause – to name just a few. At any rate, they all undoubtedly conveyed 'surprise.'

"Over here, please, Matsudaira-san."

From amongst these seething voices, Touko-chan emerged looking completely unaffected by the reaction, and took the final few steps to stand beside Mami-san.

On reflection, it was good that both Chisato-san and Touko-chan had made their way to the Rose Mansion before the time limit was up. As a result, when they went downstairs they were towards the front of the crowd (ie. standing near the entrance to the Rose Mansion), so they weren't expected to push their way through the crowd.

"You too, Yumi-san."

When Shimako-san pointed this out, Yumi belatedly remembered that she had to go and stand next to Touko-chan.

Standing next to Touko-chan.

Everything had been in such a state of confusion since Mami-san's alarm went off that Yumi hadn't had time to become conscious of it. However, Touko-chan had indeed said those words.

(Yumi-sama, won't you take me as your petit soeur?)

Just remembering it was enough to make her heart race. Yumi nervously looked out upon the crowd, as though she herself was the one who had found the treasure.

"Congratulations."

"Thank-you."

The interview commenced, with Yumi standing by. There was still a little bit of noise around, but everyone gave Touko-chan their attention because they all wanted to hear the full story from the finder of the red card.

"So tell me, where did you find the red card?"

"On the second floor of the Rose Mansion."

Touko-chan answered. Whereupon Mami-san asked, with a straight face:

"Could you provide us with some more details?"

Touko-chan glanced at Yumi. As though to ask, "Is that okay?" Of course, Yumi nodded. Since that answer contained a deeper meaning, it had always been her intention to tell the specifics of the location.

"On a chair. Rosa Chinensis en Bouton had been sitting atop the card."

The moment Touko-chan said this, the courtyard burst into uproarious laughter.

"Is that correct, Rosa Chinensis en Bouton?"

"Er, ah, yeah."

Yumi hastily agreed to Mami-san's request for confirmation. She hadn't considered that this would be met with laughter. Touko-chan had probably anticipated this, and that's why she'd initially responded with, "On the second floor of the Rose Mansion."

Probably thinking that this explanation was unsatisfactory, Mami-san added her own commentary.

"Immediately following the start, Rosa Chinensis en Bouton sat on that chair, the card pressed against her butt, for the entire hour. But it wasn't brute force – she'd assured us that she would stand up if anyone asked her to do so. Five minutes before the end, Rosa Chinensis en Bouton's onee-sama, Rosa Chinensis, asked her to stand up, and she started to do so, but was made to sit down again. Immediately afterward, Rosa Chinensis en Bouton was startled into standing up by the force with which Matsudaira Touko-san

entered into the room. As I'm sure all the participants that were there to witness the events would testify. Rosa Chinensis accepted this situation, and Rosa Chinensis en Bouton gave it her seal of approval. And with that, Matsudaira Touko-san was acknowledged as the winner."

After Mami-san had said that much, Noriko-chan, who had slipped away and gone back into the Rose Mansion at some earlier point in time, came dashing out of the entrance carrying a bundle of documents and whispered something into her ear. Mami-san nodded in agreement, and said:

"Since we didn't have time earlier, I'll take the opportunity now."

Grinning, she turned to Touko-chan.

"Matsudaira Touko-san, sorry to bother you, but may I see your student card?"

"Okay."

Touko-chan put her hand into her pocket and produced her student ID card. Mami-san took the card and compared it to what was on the papers that Noriko-chan brought. This was just a precaution – surely she'd registered properly.

It must have only taken about five seconds, but Yumi's nervousness grew and grew.

Mami-san nodded.

"This is indeed her entry form. She is officially recognized as the holder of the red card."

A mixture of applause and sighs could be heard from the participants who had been watching intently, awaiting the outcome.

"Now, just a reminder that in the unlikely event that two "absentee's chance" entrants both picked the correct location, those entries would not be honored."

In other words, if the prize was over-subscribed, it would not be awarded.

"Which brings me to the white card, which sadly went undiscovered. Preliminary results indicate a single entrant picked the correct location, winning the white card and the special prize of a half-day date. The name of the winner, and the location of the white card, will be published in the Valentine's Day special edition of the Lillian Kowaraban. We'll also have speculation about the dates, so we hope you'll look forward to it!"

The response to Mami-san's feel-good PR for the school newspaper was an abundance of cries of dissatisfaction. Understandable, really. The special edition wasn't going to come out today, and if it were to include speculation about the dates then it probably wouldn't be out for at least a week. Waiting that long would be hard for even the best trained dog.

But, now that she'd said that, there was no going back. Mami-san brought the event to a close, forcing the words out her mouth.

"And on that note, the "Future Roses Treasure Hunt" Valentine's Day event comes to an end. I'd like to thank everyone that was involved in the event. The future Roses will be handing out chocolates to all the participants, so please take one on your way out."

Yumi took one of the baskets that Noriko-chan had prepared and hurried to the edge of the courtyard. Similarly, Yoshino-san stationed herself near the entrance to the school buildings, and Shimako-san moved to a spot along the path that led towards the rear of the courtyard, so that the students would be enticed to disperse.

"Thanks for participating, please take one."

Inside the basket were merely bite-sized chocolates, but the participants received them as though they were the treasure.

"Thanks for your hard work."

"It was fun."

Seeing their smiling faces and hearing their words of thanks made Yumi want to throw the basket in the air and jump for joy. Of course, it would be problematic if the chocolates came flying out of the basket, so she didn't do this.

"Yumi-sama. What did you think about Touko-san finding the card?"

One of them hit her with a straight ball, out of nowhere. The girl had a tense expression on her face, as though she'd been angry when she heard the result. A first-year, apparently. Yumi wasn't busy, since this girl seemed to have waited to approach her until after the crowd had thinned out, when she wouldn't be inconveniencing anyone.

"What did I think?"

Yumi tilted her head, questioningly.

"Well, Rosa Chinensis must have realized it was on the chair, right? And yet, it seems a bit unfortunate, you know."

"I see."

This girl was being serious – there was no trace of deception or an attempt to conceal anything. So she was openly speaking what was on her mind.

"You know, whether it was Touko-san, or Rosa Chinensis, or even someone else I don't know, my feelings probably wouldn't change. I'd just be happy that someone found it. And that's how I am now."

After she'd said that, Yumi impishly drew her index finger up to her mouth.

"Although that's a bit rude to Shimako-san, since no-one found her card. Don't tell her I said that, okay?"

The first-year laughed at this, and the tension seemed to be released.

"Whether the person who found the card was someone I knew well, or someone I didn't know at all, wouldn't change my feelings."

"So you'd still feel that way, even if I'd found the card, for example?"

"Of course. I'd be delighted."

"I understand. Sorry for asking such a strange question."

"Not at all. Thanks for participating."

After taking a chocolate from the proffered basket, the girl quickly bowed her head and ran off. Feeling refreshed, Yumi watched her go for a short while.

"You done?"

Hearing that voice, Yumi turned around and saw that Yoshino-san had made her way over and was swinging her basket around.

"Rei-chan said she wanted one, and there's some left over, so is it okay if I give it to her? A chocolate, that is."

"That should be fine ... ah, wait."

Looking around the courtyard, a group of students remained congregated around Shimako-san. Would she have enough chocolates left in her basket to be able to handle that group?

"Don't worry about them. All of those girls already took a chocolate."

Yoshino-san said, yawning.

"They've got a chocolate, but they still haven't gone home?"

"You should remember what happened last year, Yumi-san."

"Ah."

Where on earth had Shimako-san hidden her white card? Those who just couldn't wait for the Lillian Kawaraban special edition to come out were sticking around, unwilling to leave. Probably intending to accompany the newspaper club members when they went to retrieve it.

"Like I said, it'll be revealed in the Lillian Kawaraban special edition."

Even at this distance, they could hear Mami-san's troubled voice as she explained the situation. But Yumi and Yoshino-san knew she really wasn't that troubled. She was just sifting out the participants, until an appropriate number remained. And, because they knew this, the group stubbornly remained, despite her calls for them to go home.

"Hold on a minute."

Mami-san said to the remaining students, then walked over to Yumi and Yoshino-san.

"It doesn't look like I'll get the numbers down any further than this, so I'm going to get the white card. How about you, Yumi-san, Yoshino-san?"

Will you come too? That's what was being asked, and Yumi and Yoshino-san looked at each other. There were about fifteen or sixteen girls

left in the group. Add to that Tsutako-san and Mami-san from the newspaper club, the leading lady Shimako-san and her petit soeur Noriko-chan, and it was a pretty big bunch. The more people there were the harder it would be to lead them, plus they already knew the hiding place, so they decided to sit this one out.

"We'll tidy up the Rose Mansion."

"Really? That'll be a great help. I told the other newspaper club members they could leave after they'd collected the hints for Shimako-san's card, and it's getting late, so this looks like a good place to call it a day. The review meeting's tomorrow at lunch. See ya."

Without waiting for an acknowledgment from Yumi or Yoshino-san, Mami-san headed back to where Shimako-san and the others were waiting. As a group, they headed off towards the school building with Shimako-san in the lead.

Which led to an odd sensation. The courtyard, which had earlier seemed to be absolutely buried beneath the mass of students suddenly seemed quite deserted, now that there were none there.

After picking up washcloths that were hanging on the line between the Rose Mansion and the school building, the bouton pair entered the Rose Mansion.

"That Touko-chan,"

Yoshino-san said, as they climbed the stairs.

"Hmm?"

"She didn't go to you, did she, Yumi-san?"

For a moment Yumi had no idea what Yoshino-san was talking about, but then Yoshino-san swung around and held out her basket, and Yumi realized that she was talking about when they were handing out chocolates to the participants.

"Ah, now that you mention it."

Yumi realized that, indeed, she hadn't seen Touko-chan get a chocolate.

"It's not, "Now that I mention it." She took a chocolate from my basket, then left. What's up with you two?"

"What do you mean, what's up with us?"

Yumi hastily followed her friend who stomped up the steps with an angry and amazed look on her face.

"Just before, there was that huge uproar when she asked to become your petit soeur in front of everyone. Then after that, it's like, ohhh, nothing happened – but that's not true, right?"

When you put it that way.

"This time she was the one that asked. So hurry up and give her the rosary already, and stop all this constant flirting, and flirting, and flirting, and flirting."

Yoshino-san waited for Yumi to finish climbing the stairs, then slung her arm over Yumi's shoulder, around her neck, and pulled it in tight.

"Owwwww."

Chocolates from their baskets scattered all over the floor.

Yumi used the dust cloth in her free right hand to signal her surrender and eventually Yoshino-san relaxed her hold. Then, rather than removing her arm, Yoshino-san left it there, swung around in front of Yumi and embraced her with both arms.

" ... I'm so glad, Yumi-san."

Yoshino-san whispered into Yumi's ear.

"Yeah."

Their bodies separated and they smiled at each other. The joy was doubled and the sadness halved. Yumi was thankful to have that sort of a friend to care for her.

"Alright. Let's hurry up and clean this place, Rei-chan's waiting in the classroom for me to meet her, so we can go home."

With satisfaction emanating from every part of her body, Yoshino-san did as she said and hurried into the room.

" ... Oh geeze."

Left behind in the corridor, Yumi gathered the scattered chocolates in her basket, picked up the washcloth and headed for the biscuit door.

"What's taking you so long?"

Yoshino-san's voice called out from inside.

Part 3.

It was only after they'd gone out the main entrance that she realized they should have left the chocolate basket behind.

"Onee-sama."

Noriko quickly closed the distance to Shimako-san, walking in front, and clasped her hand over Shimako-san's where she held the basket, allowing it to be passed to her. It had been prepared with a slightly larger number of chocolates than the others, so there was still about twenty remaining.

"Ah."

Shimako-san reacted by smiling. As Noriko expected, she too had apparently forgotten about the basket until just then.

"Thank-you."

"Don't mention it."

Shimako-san's smile was a high quality energy source for Noriko to run on. Yoshino-sama and Yumi-sama may scoff, but Noriko had no thoughts of cooling her love for her onee-sama.

So, when Mami-sama asked her, "What will you do?" naturally she answered with, "I'll go with you." She absolutely wanted to be there when the trick behind Shimako-san's hidden white card was revealed to everyone.

Of course, it would be a lie to say she wasn't interested in seeing Yumi-sama's response to Touko's confession, but that was no reason to be impatient. Let nature take its course, and since they'd reached that point it would probably end peacefully. Trying to rush things would just cause problems.

After taking possession of the basket, Noriko stood still for a while, allowing the group of white-card-seekers to catch up and overtake her, before continuing again. Having a petit soeur buzzing around the leading lady Shimako-san would be an eyesore for the participants, and Noriko didn't want that.

"Log skewered rabbit."

Noriko caught part of the conversation between the students walking ahead of her.

(Log skewered rabbit?)

What the heck. Just as she was thinking that, the image of a rabbit being spit roasted on a thick log forced its way into her head.

Log skewered rabbit. Was that the signature dish of some famous chef?

But, sticking a spit thick enough to be called a log through a rabbit, seriously –. She'd seen a TV show on this topic a while back, and the largest rabbits used for food were about the size of a medium dog.

"Enjoyable rabbit circle."

That was the next sentence she heard.

(Enjoyable rabbit circle?)

Or maybe it was, "Enjoyable rabbit check." Either way, it painted a happy picture. Rabbits dancing under a full moon.

"Shine rabbit soup."

Back on the signature dishes, then. Almost like what happened in the legend, 'The Hare of Inaba.' –

After thinking that, Noriko had a moment of realization. They still hadn't given up on trying to deduce the location of Shimako-san's white card. When the time limit was reached, it was obvious from Rosa Chinensis' testimony that six out of the seven hints had been brought to the Rose Mansion, but now the girls who had been out running around and searching had linked up, they had the full set. So they were shuffling the characters and picture around, trying to come up with the answer.

Such a shame, but neither "Log skewered rabbit" nor "Enjoyable rabbit circle" were correct. As for "Shine rabbit soup," that's not even a proper sentence. But most of all, if that was the hint, where would you search? It's not as though there's a rabbit warren anywhere on campus.

"That picture, should it really be rabbit? Or is there some better way of describing it?"

Noriko silently agreed with that statement.

(Exactly. You'll never solve the riddle if you think that's just an ordinary rabbit. Sorry that it's such a bad picture. Actually, I was the one that drew it.)

In truth, she had intended to spend some time practicing and draw a better one, but Yoshino-sama had said, "You don't want to make it too easy to understand, because then people will find the card right away." So instead Noriko submitted the initial drawing that she'd done solely from memory. If the main reason that Shimako-san's card had not been found was because of that drawing, then that was most regrettable.

Taking the path leading past the library, they came to the path lined with ginkgo trees.

Setting aside the "drawing of a rabbit that can't be called a rabbit," there were six characters.

Ku, shi, ta, no, ma, ru (in syllabic order)

As expected, no one thought that the 'ma' was the 'ma' from Maria-sama's statue, so even as they drew close they all kept walking at pace.

As they continued to walk, they slowly drew closer to the goal. And as they walked and shuffled the cards, there was a certain synergy that led to a connection, with sporadic cries of, "Ah," and, "Could it be," filling the air.

(Yes, that's correct.)

Inside the school gates, just beside the security guard's post was the car park.

The white-card-recovery-squad watched a blue car come out of the car park, then went in.

"You were looking to make a big splash, huh Shimako-san."

Mami-san muttered when they saw the car park.

"... Indeed."

Following their gaze, the students all dashed off in search of the answer. Noriko too sprinted away, flustered. The basket was a bit of a nuisance, but Noriko ran with one hand over the top of it to keep the chocolates from spilling out.

"Such high spirits."

Shimako-san smiled at Mami-sama, as neither gave chase. They both continued to walk calmly. Of course, Noriko already knew where the card was hidden, so she hadn't had to wait until now to get the answer. But she did want to find out what state it was in currently.

At that moment, there were hardly any cars in the car park. They continued further in, to the spaces near the wall that were reserved for the teaching staff.

"..."

When they reached the destination, the students stood there, dumbstruck.

(Victory to Shimako-san.)

In her mind, Noriko assumed a triumphant pose.

In the parking area reserved for teachers, in a single parking space, a transparent plastic sleeve was stuck to the ground with masking tape. Despite the plastic, there was no mistaking it. Inside was –

"The white card ... "

Someone said.

"But, I had a look around this area earlier, and it wasn't like this."

Someone else said, dumbfounded.

"The cars that were parked here during the treasure hunt have since left."

The girls turned around to look at the voice that called out from behind them, and there was Mami-sama, who had finally arrived. Shimako-san was standing beside her.

"Which should lead you to the answer."

"... Under the car."

"That's about 80% right."

It wasn't clear what she was basing that grade on, but Mami-sama peeled the tape off the ground and picked up the plastic sleeve containing the card.

"As expected from a pro driver like Aota-sensei, there's no tyre tracks over it at all."

"Aota ... ah, Miffy-chan!"

"Yep. Miffy-chan, so the correct answer was under Aota-sensei's car."

Mami-sama pointed at the concrete bumper, and everyone saw that it had "Aota" written on it in white paint.

Aota-sensei's nickname was Miffy-chan. Aota-sensei was a middle-school teacher, and since Noriko only entered Lillian's Girls Academy at the start of high-school, she didn't know the reason behind the nickname, or even what Aota-sensei looked like.

They'd discussed this in an earlier meeting, and to avoid certain students have an unfair advantage, the Lillian Kwaraban had printed an article about Aota-sensei as part of their "Teach us! OO-sensei" series. This article, in the second edition of the paper for the year, contained the nickname "Miffy-chan" as part of the profile, so the plan was a go.

Incidentally, Aota-sensei was unaware of the plan. While Mami-sama had been explaining the rules of the contest, a first-year from the newspaper club had run to the car park and stuck the card underneath the car. At any rate, it was just as well they didn't go home while the event was taking place, or it wouldn't be "Under Aota-sensei's car," but, "On the ground where Aota-sensei's car is usually parked."

"Aota-sensei wouldn't go home while the event was happening, to make sure the middle-schoolers weren't breaking the rules. Only after it had been brought to a successful conclusion would they go."

Anticipating this, Shimako-san had selected Aota-sensei's car. A big splash indeed. Like the ebb and flow of the tides, the look of the hiding place changed over time.

"Ah – "

One of the students cried out, suddenly.

"That blue car from before!"

"You're right! That was Miffy-chan driving it!"

A number of other cries rang out, "What a shame," being one of them, but all the girls that spoke out had a touch of pleasant surprise mixed in their voice.

– I want fun.

That had been Shimako-san's theme. On that account, you could call it a huge success.

(Now I understand.)

The visage of Aota-sensei.

"He really does look just like Dick Bruna."

While Noriko was remembering the face of the middle-aged man in the car that had left the car park just before, and admiring Shimako-san's work, Shimako-san drew alongside her and gently took her hand.

(Ah.)

She didn't put it into words, but, "Thanks for your co-operation," came through loud and clear.

Shimako-san's hand was warm and soft, and Noriko wanted to remain joined like that forever.

(Oh no.)

The chocolates inside the basket would all melt away.

Part 4.

The car park was quite lively.

Casting a sidelong glance, Rei-chan muttered quietly, but with feeling:

"Shimako's card was underneath Aota-sensei's car."

For the nth time.

"We didn't even think about that, last year."

Yoshino joked in her mind, "I've already heard that too," but didn't say anything.

In Rei-chan's hand was a paper bag. Inside, atop a pile of other chocolates, were some humble store bought chocolates that were being treated with the utmost reverence.

"You're quiet, Yoshino. Not angry anymore?"

Rei-chan asked, after they passed through the school gates.

"I'm still angry."

"Oh?"

"My anger's just exhausted too."

Hearing that, Rei-chan sounded a bit dejected as she sighed and said, "Is that so?"

If Yoshino were telling the truth, then she'd have said that she didn't know if she was angry or not any more. Nonetheless, after cleaning countless cups with Yumi-san, then flying out of the Rose Mansion saying, "Leave the rest for tomorrow," Yoshino had wanted to see Rei-chan waiting for her in the classroom. She knew that if she said that, then Rei-chan would be absolutely delighted. And yet, she didn't say that. She uttered the mean-spirited phrase, "My anger's just exhausted too," and Rei-chan was dejected.

Even though Rei-chan should be the truly exhausted one because of her exams, and it was probably the duty of those around her to be kind, and speak gently, to her. It annoyed Yoshino that she was unable to connect in that manner. Truthfully, that sort of self-loathing was a large part of the reason behind her silence.

"Is that so?"

Rei-chan muttered, once more. The phrase that Yoshino had blurted out because she didn't want to appear reticent due to exhaustion came back to bite her again, leaving her feeling like she'd dug herself into a hole that fit her precisely.

"Even though you're carrying that bag for me because it's heavy, I'll take care of the chocolates until after your exams are over. Because if you take them, you'll idiotically waste two or three hours opening them, checking the contents, and reading the letters."

Well, that's done it. "Carrying that bag for me," was hardly polite. And Yoshino knew the reason Rei-chan would open the packages and read the letters wasn't idiocy, but simply kindness. Why did everything have to come out sounding so abusive?

Yoshino kicked a small pebble that had fallen in front of her with her black shoe. The pebble skipped forward erratically until it struck the tall school wall and stopped.

Rei-chan was kind. Yoshino knew that better than anyone.

"Okay. Thanks."

Rei-chan said.

"What are you thanking me for?"

Yoshino arched her eyebrows. In her heart she'd been thinking it, but she hadn't said 'kindness.'

"Well, if you're doing that, it means you're going to make a list of people who gave me a gift, right? Like last year?"

Oooh. How can she say something like that so innocently.

"... I hadn't thought of that."

Yoshino looked down as she squeezed those words out, and the response she got was a carefree, "Is that so?"

"So what was it you were annoyed about again, Yoshino?"

"I'll have to be careful of it," Rei-chan said, then followed it up immediately with a shouted, "Ah!"

"What is it?"

"I have to give a 'Valentine's Chocolates Request Ticket' to my onee-sama too!"

"... You say that while I'm standing right here."

It would appear that Rei-chan's obsession with minor details could not be cured so easily. Even if it was turned off, there's no doubting that she'd be making a 'Valentine's Chocolates Request Phone Call' to Eriko-sama tonight.

Nothing she could do about that.

As she was losing her temper, Yoshino looked towards the setting sun and pondered whether she'd be involved with Eriko-sama for the rest of her life.

Why was that.

"Is it okay if I just take your chocolates home with me, Yoshino?"

Rei-chan asked.

"Why would you ask that now?"

That was patently obvious, wasn't it?

Yoshino was a special case.

That alone was an absolutely unshakeable truth between the two of them.

Part 5.

Yoshino-san said, "Leave the rest for tomorrow," then raced out.

Shimako-san, Mami-san and Noriko-chan had gone to retrieve the white card and not yet returned. The newspaper club members had gone to fetch the hints about Shimako-san's card that they had placed just as the event was starting.

The mass of washed cups were all lined up on the drainer tray, the drips of water falling into the sink. Peeking out from the garbage bin were the paper cups that they'd been forced to use when the number of guests overtook the number of tea cups they had.

Hanging over the side of the empty buckets were the washcloths that had been wrung dry, flattened out and neatly lined up.

Caught in the orange glow coming through the windows, a speck of dust slowly fell.

It was quiet, as though the commotion that had occurred just recently had all been a lie. Alone, Yumi surveyed the room and let out a sigh.

All that remains of the warriors dreams.

The event's finally over, huh – After the festival, loneliness was her companion. The part of her that had been busy with preparations, the fun and excitement that she'd had, both left a lingering aftertaste that would remain forever.

"... I suppose I should go home."

Yumi wrote a note on the back of an unneeded printout.

"I've gone home. Leave the rest for tomorrow."

A message to let Shimako-san and the rest know that further cleanup was unnecessary, on the off chance that they returned.

Yumi latched the windows closed and drew the curtains.

She plucked a single chocolate from the basket of leftovers, unwrapped it and popped it in her mouth. This was Fukuzawa Yumi's reward for giving her all today.

She left the Rose Mansion and entered the school building. She took a slight detour to venture past the first-year camellia classroom and the second-year pine classroom before going to her shoe locker.

Maybe Touko-chan had been waiting for her. That's what she'd been thinking.

Yumi still hadn't replied to her question, "Won't you take me as your petit soeur?" So that's why she'd thought, just maybe.

However, Touko-chan was in neither location. Just to be sure, Yumi had a look inside Touko-chan's shoe box, and saw her indoor shoes neatly lined up.

(Well, I guess that's that.)

Since they hadn't made any arrangement to meet, there's no way she would have waited around that late.

(Still.)

Did that mean Touko-chan wasn't concerned about Yumi's reply? Since Yumi had asked first, did Touko-chan think that by asking that they had become soeurs?

(Or maybe even.)

Touko-chan was satisfied with just saying those words, and would ignore whatever response was given, say.

"Yumi."

When Yumi opened her eyes after praying at the statue of Maria-sama, Sachiko-sama was standing there.

"Onee-sama ... "

"I thought I should hold back, in case you were with Touko-chan."

So by saying that, her onee-sama must have meant that she'd waited somewhere out of sight for Yumi to arrive.

"No, I'm all alone."

Sachiko-sama smiled and said, "Indeed." She must have instantly understood that Yumi hadn't yet had a chance to speak with Touko-chan.

Because from that point on she made no further mention of Touko-chan, instead taking hold of Yumi's hand and saying, "You've worked hard today."

From the glimpses she could get between the trees, there didn't appear to be anyone left in the car park. They must have returned to the school building while Yumi had been climbing the stairs to the first and second-year classrooms, and just missed each other.

"Onee-sama."

Yumi called out.

"Wha~at?"

"Did you, perhaps, concede victory to Touko-chan for my sake, or something – "

That thought had popped into Yumi's head as she watched her onee-sama's gentle face in profile. Her onee-sama was always thinking of her first. Since Yumi hadn't given up on Touko-chan, and now that it looked like Touko-chan had met her halfway, perhaps she'd done this to set the stage for the two of them – although that may have been over-thinking it.

"Not at all."

However, Sachiko-sama flat out denied it.

"It's true that I was well on my way to victory. If Touko-chan hadn't burst into the room, I'm sure I would have been the one to be interviewed as the winner. But when I took a step back in the face of that intensity, the match was decided. Therefore, make no mistake that the winner was Touko-chan. I merely confirmed that."

"Is that right?"

"It is. Don't be so suspicious of my motives. Silly Yumi."

Her onee-sama picked up the pace slightly. Yumi eagerly followed so that their hands wouldn't part.

After reaching the bus stop, she let out a sigh.

"Really, silly Yumi."

"Onee-sama?"

"Because you said that, I had to remember my defeat, didn't I?"

"Ah."

Sachiko-sama lifted one leg off the ground and stamped down with all her might.

"... I remember too."

Sachiko-sama's personality was such that she hated to lose.

The "Absentee's Chance" Girl

Part 1.

The following day.

Yumi went to school with a slight stomach ache and muscular pains, which she believed to be due to the tension of sitting on that chair the previous day. The lively nature of the high-school area made the melancholic feelings about the remains of the warriors dreams that she'd felt while all alone in the Rose Mansion at twilight after the event seem like a lie.

"We've heard, Yumi-san."

"Huh?"

Upon entering the classroom, she was pounced on by four, no, five of her classmates without even a "Gokigenyou."

"Matsudaira Touko-san, and how she nominated herself."

"Oh."

Yumi went to hang her bag on the hook at the side of her desk but missed, accidentally dropping it on the floor.

"Umm?"

What to do, what do do? As she picked her bag up off the ground, Yumi looked confused.

"There's no point playing dumb. Everyone knows. "Yumi-sama, won't you take me as your petit soeur?" – she said."

"Ah."

Yumi had completely forgotten. Well, she most definitely had not forgotten that Touko-chan had asked to be her petit soeur. What she had forgotten was that the confession had taken place in front of a large audience.

There was no zipper on people's mouths. Especially when the subject was as fresh and juicy as this, so it was only human nature that those in the know would pass that knowledge on to everyone else.

"That's not exactly right."

Rather than being a self-nomination, it had all started when Yumi initially asked Touko-chan to be her petit soeur. Well, at that time she'd been rejected, so this was something akin to a settling of the score.

Because of that, and other things, from Yumi's point of view it was seen more as a response to her previously expressed feelings than a self-nomination. But for those people who had no knowledge of those other events, the request must have seemed like it came from out of the blue. A while back, there had been that rumor about Touko-chan being a candidate for Yumi's petit soeur, but she hadn't called on the Rose Mansion in a while, plus she'd nominated herself in the election for the school council which had taken place last month, so to people watching on the likelihood of that had dropped dramatically.

"And?"

"And, what?"

When Yumi asked this, they all closed in on her, eyes sparkling.

"Have you answered her yet?"

"Huhh!?"

"Is she your petit soeur? Or not?"

"Ah, umm ... "

"If she wants to be your petit soeur, that means she likes you, right Yumi-san? So why has Matsudaira Touko-san been acting so rebelliously up until now?"

"Well, that's ... "

That was asking a question that Yumi didn't know the answer to, so she was stumped.

"I wonder if it's that sort of thing after all. They bicker and fight then they love each other."

"Oooh, how romantic!"

"Like the way young boys will bully the girls they like?"

"Oooh, how adorable!"

Yumi just let them continue talking as much as they wanted. That way, it wouldn't matter whether the subject of the rumors was present or not. Then she could just quietly slip away – although, since she was surrounded, quietly slipping away would be quite tricky.

(Ahh, what was it?)

A long time ago, Sachiko-sama had taught her a way to deal with this type of situation. When there's something you want to say, wait until the conditions around you are ripe for listening, then say it once, clearly. While everything around you is noisy, be like the willow in the breeze.

So, while they continued to chatter on seemingly endlessly, Yumi listened intently.

"Touko-san's in the drama club, isn't she? Up until now, they've only done performances with the whole club!"

"Ohh, so this is a supporting actress role!"

"Don't you mean lead role?"

"Wouldn't that be Yumi-san?"

"No way!"

(...It's hopeless. I can't use onee-sama's trick this time around.)

Not only were the conditions around her never going to be ripe for listening, but, more importantly, Yumi had absolutely no idea what she should say to them.

"Even still, the current first-years are pretty audacious."

"Approaching an older girl and putting their name forward? Maybe they just know no fear?"

"Yeah, that's something we never would have even thought about doing."

They grumbled, like old people complaining about kids these days.

"So, what about me?"

A familiar voice called out from behind them. Stung by these sharp words, everyone turned to look, and standing there, in an imposing stance, was Yoshino-san.

"Umm."

One of her classmates opened their mouth, to try and clear the misunderstanding.

"What we were saying ... was about Matsudaira Touko-san."

She stalled and avoided saying, "Has nothing to do with you, Yoshino-san."

That was correct.

"Approaching an older student, nominating yourself."

The events of one year prior needed no introduction. Yoshino-san, as a first-year, had been the one to nominate herself. Not only that, she'd previously taken the outlandish step of handing her rosary back to her onee-sama. It was known as the "Yellow Rose Revolution."

So, rather than being something, "we never would have thought about doing," it was actually ground that Yoshino-san had already covered. Not only that, but it was a path that countless girls followed her down, although those memories seemed to have been covered in weeds and slipped from mind completely just recently.

"... Sorry. My mistake."

Any criticism of Touko-chan was the same as criticizing the pioneer of that move, Yoshino-san. Having recognized that, her classmate meekly apologized. But if that's what they really thought, then there was no need to apologize – except it would be more trouble than it was worth. Yoshino-san could be persistent and annoying.

"Don't worry about it. Just so long as you realize that what Touko-chan did is no big deal."

She smiled sweetly. That, in itself, was scary.

"Yeah ... of course."

The ring of people around Yumi loosened, as one by one her classmates stepped back.

"Well then, I'll have to borrow Yumi-san for a little while. We've got a review meeting in the Rose Mansion."

Yoshino-san thrust her hand into the ring of people and grabbed Yumi's arm. Then, while Yumi was still confused, marched her out of the classroom.

"Review meeting?"

Wasn't that supposed to be during lunch? When Yumi asked this, Yoshino-san responded with, "Stupid."

"That was a ruse. If I hadn't said that, I wouldn't have been able to get you out of there."

"Ah, I see."

She'd noticed that Yumi had been in trouble, and come to rescue her. Sharp.

"Thank-you."

"You're welcome."

Setting aside the review meeting, Yumi had been thinking about going to the Rose Mansion this morning anyway, since they'd only half-finished the cleaning yesterday. She was still wearing her coat when she'd been dragged out of the classroom, but Yumi figured, "Ahh, whatever," and walked alongside Yoshino-san.

"So anyway, what happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"With Touko-chan. Although I know I'm doing the same thing as those other girls. But it's okay, you can tell me."

Well, that was fine.

"Nothing, so far."

They hadn't met after that. So Yumi had no juicy information to report.

"You didn't call her? – Although, that's probably not right."

"Feels wrong somehow, doesn't it?"



Although, after returning home yesterday, Yumi caught herself looking at the telephone and almost standing up a couple of times. But in the end she hesitated, as though the proposal had been made over the telephone and she was sending her response as a text. It would be different if they were in a long-distance relationship, but they went to the same school, so she felt like they should meet properly, face-to-face. Of course, there were plenty of people who wouldn't care about that sort of thing.

"Hold on, I'll just run down to first-year camellia class and get Touko-chan."

As soon as she said this, Yoshino-san spun around and headed for the first-year classrooms.

"Wai ... no, stop."

Yumi frantically grabbed Yoshino-san's arm and pulled her back.

"See, she threw the ball to you, now it's your turn. What do you think would have happened if she came to our classroom to hear your response? The reaction. Even for someone who knows no fear, like Touko-chan."

"... Yeah. I guess."

That much was true.

"But, because of the reaction, you shouldn't go."

If Yumi was peppered with questions by her classmates because Touko-chan asked to be her *petit soeur*, think of how much worse it must be for Touko-chan herself. Add more fuel on to that fire, and who knows what you'd get.

"I see. If I act, things will just get more out of control."

Yoshino-san concluded, and stopped. Once more she changed direction, and they headed towards the Rose Mansion.

"Sorry. I know you were just looking out for me."

"It's fine. But if there's anything you want me to do, just let me know."

"Okay."

Take this, as an example. With just one or two sentences, another ten or twenty could be implied. Yumi felt that these instances highlighted the evolution of their friendship.

When they arrived at the Rose Mansion, the White Rose sisters and Mami-san were already there.

Even though the review meeting was scheduled for lunch, they'd probably all assembled for the same reason. Given the number of people that had passed through the Rose Mansion yesterday, a haphazard cleanup would not suffice.

"So, Yumi-san?"

Shimako-san asked, hesitantly. – The implication being, "What happened afterward?"

It was only natural that those who had witnessed it all unfold were interested in how it ended.

While Yumi apologetically thought about how she made them all worry, she also knew that that didn't necessarily entitle them to know all the gory details, so she made a similar report to what she'd told Yoshino-san earlier, plus what had happened on their way over here. Mami-san from the newspaper club was there, but that didn't bother her. Mami-san probably wouldn't go off and use it in an article.

"Right."

Shimako-san nodded. That nod implied, "Settling things in a reasonable manner is fine."

"As for Touko."

Noriko-chan spoke.

"It seems that she's come to school, but she hasn't been to our classroom. Yumi-sama, Yoshino-sama, you made the right choice in not coming to our class. It was in uproar. They were even thronging around me."

Just as Yumi had expected, it was hardest on Touko-chan.

Nobody said anything, but perhaps the sooner Yumi gave Touko-chan the rosary and officially made her her petit soeur, the better.

Part 2.

The review meeting took place in the Rose Mansion over lunch.

The attendees were, from the Rose families, the three second-year future Roses plus Noriko-chan, and members of the newspaper club.

They had gone through what went well, concerns, ideas for improvement and were currently working their way through complaints that had been received from teachers and students. Since it was only the day after the event, it seemed unlikely that they'd received all the feedback they would, but for now they were just going through the raw opinions they'd collected. In good time, they planned on sending a survey to the participants.

The review meeting wasn't particularly interesting, but it was something that had to be done. As Yoshino chewed on her fried chicken, she idly listened to the conversation flowing back and forth across her.

"You know, it's just a minor thing, but I wonder if the red card got a bit crinkled?"

Yumi-san raised her hand, and gave her report. After spending about an hour trapped between the chair's cushion and her backside, it did come out looking a little bit wrinkled. Geeze, it really was a minor detail.

"If Matsudaira Touko-san requests so, we should replace the card. Sorry to bother you Yumi-san, but if that happens would you write another one?"

When Mami-san shot a sidelong glance at Yumi-san looking for confirmation, Yoshino remarked, to no-one in particular:

"It's not like Touko-chan's going to ask to have the card replaced anyway. Yumi-san spent the whole time warming it up."

A quick glance at Yumi-san showed she felt the same, and wasn't particularly displeased by that, but then her serious face returned and she said, "But we can't know that for sure." Recently, Yumi-san had adopted a 'by-the-books' approach. As a result, the jabs made to alleviate the boredom just looked childish.

At any rate, they decided to have Noriko-chan ask Touko-chan. The likelihood of anyone using the same hiding location next year was pretty low, so there was no pressing need to develop a plan to combat 'crinkling of the card when it's between cushion and buttocks.'

"As for the yellow card. The most common complaint I heard was people didn't understand whether it's hiding place was in bounds or out of bounds. It looks like those towards the end of the line didn't hear the explanation."

At the mention of the yellow card, Yoshino's heart started to beat a little faster.

"Understood. We'll follow-up with a diagram in the next issue of the Lillian Kwaraban. We'll do the same thing for the red and white cards too."

Mami-san quickly disposed of the issue.

"There was a window of opportunity between the end of the event and when we went to collect the white card where someone could have spotted the card and taken it home. We probably should have assigned someone to watch over it."

"Then shouldn't newspaper club staff collect the cards when the announcement is made?"

"But if we did that, it would give people a clue to search near the newspaper club staff in the dying moments of the game, wouldn't it?"

"Plus the participants would follow them around, wanting to see where the cards were."

(Hmmp.)

— And so it continued, from the large to the small, Yoshino stuffed her face as the various opinions flew past her. Everyone was taking it all so seriously.

"Well, that should be about all."

Mami-san used the passing around of the after-lunch tea as an excuse to end the meeting, and Noriko-chan brought a cardboard box over from the corner of the room.

This was today's main event, the opening of the absentee's chance box. Yoshino clapped in anticipation. She'd endured the boring review meeting solely for the moment when the absentee's chance box was opened.

The box was still in the same sealed condition that it had been since the start of the treasure hunt. Mami-san didn't open the sealed mouth of the box, instead turning it over and breaking the seal on the bottom of the box (which was just done with masking tape and magic marker), before dumping the contents on to the table.

"There's two things we're looking for. The first is the name. Check that it isn't Tanuma Chisato-san or Matsudaira Touko-san. The other is the location. Anything that has carpark, or car, or Aota-sensei, or any similar keyword should be put to one side."

Everyone agreed with Mami-san's instructions, and set about the task of sifting through the entries. A lot of them had been folded to fit in the mail slot easier, and unfolding them took precious time.

(Name, name ... uh)

Yoshino ran her eyes down that line of text.

(Iida, Sakashita, Matsunaga ... argh, they're all wrong)

In Yoshino's case, she was checking for three names. Tanuma, Matsudaira, and Arima.

(Nana. Surely you must have entered the absentee's chance draw, right?)

Yoshino had even gone all the way to the middle-school to tell her about the treasure hunt. Nana hadn't exactly jumped at the chance, but she did say, "That sounds fun." Or maybe it had been, "That could be fun."

(Arima, Arima, where's Arima?)

Consequently, Yoshino wanted to check all the entries herself.

Of course, even if she did find Nana's entry, and Nana had written the correct location, it was too late anyway. Tanuma Chisato-san was the winner, and that was that. Even so, Yoshino still wanted to know. How much did Nana know about her? How close was she to Yoshino's thinking?

"Yoshino-san, are you looking at them properly?"

Yumi-san whispered to her.

"You're going kind of quickly."

"Ah."

Yoshino realized she'd only been checking the names, and stuck out her tongue. Because she was peeved, she didn't want to admit she'd messed up.

"First I'm doing a quick check of the names, then I'm going to go back over them and check the location."

After giving her justification, Yoshino took her stack of 'rejected' entries and set them in front of her once again.

(Inside the watering can in the old greenhouse, beneath the mat by the school building's emergency exit.)

Not in those places, nope. In her mind, Yoshino poked fun at them as she read the locations. It was a bit rude, but reading everyone's predictions when she knew the truth made her smile.

"Yoshino-san."

Shimako-san held out a piece of paper to her.

"Was this what you were worried about?"

"What's that?"

She hurriedly took it.

"..."

However.

"This."

After reading the name written there she was bewildered, in more ways than one.

– Hasekura Rei. It was Rei-chan's entry form.

"Am I wrong?"

Shimako-san asked, looking straight at her.

"Nope. Thanks."

Until right at that moment, she had forgotten about Rei-chan. Obviously not her existence, but that Rei-chan had entered into the absentee's draw.

"Library, reading room – "

Ahh, how simple. The hiding place that Rei-chan had so confidently written was the DIY corner where last year Yoshino had hunted through the cooking and handicraft books.

(Was this supposed to be a return favor for last year?)

It was really quite idiotic. Most of the books there weren't restricted to in-library use. Even though Rei-chan had hidden a card last year, she still hadn't realized that.

Yoshino let out a sigh, then returned to her task.

(Beneath the tatami mats in the martial arts building? Is this first-year a fan of mine?)

That put her in a somewhat better mood.

(On the wall in front of the staff room.)

So close. If the yellow card hadn't been found, this would definitely be a candidate. But, this was for the white card. They were looking for whoever was closest to under Aota-sensei's car in the staff parking lot.

(But is there really going to be anyone who would write that? Even guessing the parking lot would be hard.)

Just as she thought that.

"Ah!"

Yoshino called out, by reflex.

"What's the matter?"

Everyone was looking at her.

"Here, this."

Yoshino handed the piece of paper to Mami-san.

Igawa Ami.

Beneath the name of the unknown first-year.

The words, "Under a car in the staff parking lot," were written.

Part 3.

"Is Igawa Ami-san available?"

Standing at the entrance to the first-year peach classroom, Shimako asked the closest member of that class.

Calling upon a stranger was a little bit nerve-wracking. However, Shimako felt that the reason her heart was beating slightly faster was probably due to the nostalgia she felt for the classroom that she'd been studying in last year.

"Yeah."

As soon as the student saw Shimako's face, she stiffened and said, "Wait here," then ran off into the classroom. 'Fleeing' would probably be the best way to describe her appearance.

Even though it hadn't been Shimako's intention to cause a commotion. But, that was probably the terrifying life of the older student.

(I suppose I should have expected it.)

Back when Shimako had been a member of this class, from time to time her onee-sama or Sachiko-sama would come to visit her, and her classmates would walk like a robot over to her and speak in a monotone as they announced her visitor's presence.

Coming here alone had probably been for the best, after all.

The initial plan had been to have Mami-san and the first-year Noriko-chan accompany her. However, since the announcement hadn't been made in the Lillian Kavaraban yet, they wanted to keep it as quiet as possible, so Shimako had offered to perform the task alone. None of the people in the Rose Mansion at lunch time knew the girl's name or face, so it was a good idea to meet the winner of the half-day date and have a chat with her.

The afternoon classes had finished, and it was about the time when the cleaning duties were drawing to a close. Since the student she'd talked to hadn't returned immediately, it probably meant Igawa Ami-san was

somewhere in the room. Glancing around inside, Shimako saw the student from before talking to another student over by the window.

(Could it be her ... ?)

It was hard to see her face because of the distance, and the obscuring effect of the shoulder-length hair that fell past her ears. After a further exchange, the second girl turned and walked towards Shimako.

"I'm Igawa Ami."

Was she imagining things? For a moment, Shimako felt like she'd met this girl somewhere before.

"Gokigenyou."

"Why did you want to see me?"

"You entered into the absentee's draw, right? It's about that."

After Shimako said this, Ami-san said, "If you don't mind?" and walked out into the hallway.

"Huh?"

Shimako didn't know what was going on, but she turned to follow the person she had to talk to and chased after her. Since Ami-san was going quite fast, it made it look like they were two people walking down the corridor on their own separate tasks.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to go somewhere private."

The place they'd arrived at, after going out the emergency exit, was a stairwell landing. Indeed, in this chilly season, there was no one around to overhear them, no matter where the wind blew their words.

"You have a lot of fans in my class. If they found out I won the absentee's chance draw, they would all resent me."

"It looks like you already know that you're the winner."

Shimako probed as she folded her arms. It was cold outside, after all.

"Yeah. Well, more or less."

Rather than being disinterested, she was just being blunt. Wouldn't someone whose guess turned out to be correct be more surprised?

"I heard a rumor from my classmates this morning that the white card had been hidden in the car park. So you see."

Shimako hadn't been expecting a fawning attitude, but these curt responses made even someone as usually trusting as her start to get suspicious. That perhaps the girl was answering this way because it was a bother to her.

Thinking about it, the absentee's draw required the participants to predict where the cards were hidden, but there was no line on the entry form saying whose card it was. Maybe when Igawa Ami-san had written, "Under a car in the staff parking lot," she had been thinking of the yellow card, or maybe even the red card.

"So then ... the white card and the ticket for the half-day date – "

Just in case, Shimako decided to confirm it. If the girl refused, she'd have to check with Mami-san about what to do, but it made sense that it would go to the next closest entrant. However.

"Of course I'll take it."

Ami-san answered.

"Oh, ah, right."

So apparently she would exercise her right. This constant stream of unexpected responses left Shimako feeling dizzy.

"May, ahh, may I see your student notebook? It's just a formality."

She'd been told to confirm that she had the right person before handing the card over. They had already confirmed that there wasn't an entry form with Igawa Ami's name on it for participating in yesterday's main event. As soon as this girl could prove that she was Igawa Ami-san, she would be officially recognized as the holder of the white card. In other words, she would occupy the same position as Tanuma Chisato-san regarding the yellow card and Matsudaira Touko-chan regarding the red card.

"Here."

Ami-san took her student notebook from her pocket and held it out to Shimako.

Inside the front cover, "First-year peach class, student number two, Igawa Ami," was clearly written.

"Splendid. Thank-you."

Nodding, Ami-san closed her notebook.

"That's all for now, but I'll be in touch later."

When she heard this, Ami-san said, "About that," and then stopped.

"Huh?"

" ... About that, I have a favor to ask."

Shimako asked what it was.

"If you could – "

Once more, a completely unexpected statement made its way to Shimako's ears.

Unexpected Words

Part 1.

Shimako-san let out a sigh.

"What's the matter? Weren't you able to meet with something-something Ami-san?"

Yumi asked, when she saw the figure enter the Rose Mansion and slump down on a chair in exhaustion.

By the time they'd opened the box of absentee's chance entries and determined who the winner of the white card was, there hadn't been much time left in the lunch break. So they decided that Shimako-san would pay a visit to the winner after school. That much, Yumi knew. Shimako-san had departed holding the application form of the successful candidate, with her cheeks slightly flushed. Almost like the bride-to-be after an arranged marriage interview.

It had been about two and a half hours since then. Shimako-san's actions suggested something had happened.

Since Shimako-san arrived at the Rose Mansion so much later than usual, Yumi had conjectured that her conversation with the other girl must have been going really well. But judging from her appearance, that seemed unlikely.

"It's Igawa Ami-san. And I was able to meet her, however."

"However?"

"... it was a lot more trouble than I had expected."

"Trouble?"

As she parroted this word, Yumi thought, "In what way?" Was there some problem with Igawa Ami-san herself? Was there some kind of peripheral inconvenience, although nothing sprang to mind there. Or was there some incompatibility between her and Shimako-san?

"But I can't really explain what I mean all that well."

Shimako-san let out another sigh.

"Gah, you're taking so long. Just say it already."

Yoshino-san thumped the table a number of times, albeit softly.

"Just what did she do that's rubbed you the wrong way, Shimako-san?"

"I wouldn't say that she rubbed me the wrong way."

Right on cue, Shimako-san corrected Yoshino-san on this point. Beside her, Noriko-chan nodded in agreement. If Shimako-san hadn't said anything, she probably would have.

"So you were able to meet with this Igawa Ami-san then, Shimako-san?"

Yumi asked, seeking confirmation, and Shimako-san answered with, "Yeah."

"And the white card? Did you hand it over?"

"I did. She showed me her student notebook."

Just as they'd planned. Yumi didn't see how there could be any problem with things up to this point.

"Then I was going to talk to her about the schedule of things to come."

"You were going to?"

"She asked me not to come around to her classroom any more."

"Huh!?"

Nobody could believe their ears.

"Not to come around to her classroom? Then, what did she want? Is she going to see you in your classroom?"

Shimako-san shook her head.

"She proposed that we meet in a specific location at fixed intervals. Say, in front of a specific set of shelves in the library after school."

"What's up with that?"

Yoshino-san frowned. Yumi herself undoubtedly had a similar expression on her face.

"At any rate, it looks like she wants to avoid the public gaze. At least when she's with me."

However, since they had to plan the half-day date together, they had to meet. So the library, then. People at the library were generally caught up in

their own affairs, so they probably wouldn't pay attention to everyone around them.

"In that case, couldn't she come to the Rose Mansion?"

Shimako-san's response was mumbled, as though she found it hard to get the words out.

"She said she didn't even want to come to tomorrow's explanatory meeting in the Rose Mansion."

"Wha!?"

Who did this first-year think she was? Anger was the appropriate response to such an arrogant attitude. But if she was supposed to be angry, why was Shimako-san so lethargic?

"Now I get it."

Yoshino-san said.

"I see why Shimako-san's so exhausted."

"... Yeah."

It was truly terrifying, the Igawa Ami-san virus. Compared to this, the contagion rate of influenza was no big deal. In the twinkling of an eye, it had spread to 100% of the population of the Rose Mansion. The symptoms were lethargy, sighing, and fatigue.

"Gokigenyou. Oh? What's wrong, everyone? You don't look well. Has the exhaustion from yesterday finally caught up with you?"

Mami-san cheerfully called out, after arriving a bit late, and seeing the lack of energy surrounding her in the Rose Mansion. But her enthusiasm was sure to be short lived. After hearing the story of Igawa Ami-san, Mami-san would surely display the same symptoms. The infection rate was 100%, after all.

However.

"I see. Not much we can do about that, then."

Even after hearing the tale, Mami-san retained her energetic state.

"We haven't printed anything about the explanatory meeting in the Lillian Kwaraban, and even though she has refused to attend, we're not

going to disqualify her just for that. At a minimum, all we require is a report on the date. That's the only non-negotiable requirement."

Just what you'd expect from the head of the newspaper club. Her experience arguing with teachers and various other students probably led her to the conclusion, "It takes all sorts to make a world," and she remained unperturbed.

"So, what to do?"

"I'm sorry to bother you with this Shimako-san. But, for now, can you go along with Igawa Ami-san's requests? If she doesn't want to stand out, we shouldn't push her into the limelight. She may well become accustomed to it, to the point where she'll be seen with you around school."

"Understood."

Shimako-san agreed.

"As for the explanatory meeting ... I'll write up the details and you can give that to her. I'll make a copy for Tanuma Chisato-san and Matsudaira Touko-san too. Then we can change tomorrow's explanatory meeting to a purely optional one."

"Is that okay?"

"It's neither good nor bad. But it's about all we can do. If we try to be difficult, it'll just create more problems."

Compromise required both sides to give a little, and if this was what was required to get things done, then so be it. Everyone was busy, and there was no point sweating the small stuff.

"Which brings me to the schedule for the dates. Have the three of you come to a decision?"

"On that matter."

Yoshino-san raised her hand.

"If possible, can we have all three on the same day?"

Yumi exchanged glances with Shimako-san.

"That should be fine, but."

"Why?"

In Yumi's case, she hadn't even considered the possibility that they would be on different days. Why so? Because last year, Rei-sama and Shimako-san had had their dates on the same day, which just happened to coincide with the day that Yumi and Sachiko-sama went on a date unrelated to the treasure hunt. Consequently, she thought it only natural that they should all happen on the same day.

"Why, you ask? Isn't it obvious – to diffuse the efforts of the newspaper club in following us."

They heard the sound of someone clearing their throat, just towards the end of that statement. Turning to look, Mami-san was glaring at Yoshino-san with a frown on her face.

"This strategy meeting. Are you sure it wouldn't be better if I wasn't here?"

Indeed. As the current editor-in-chief of the Lillian Kavaraban, Mami-san could hold the title of Miss Newspaper Club.

"Ah. It doesn't matter if you hear it. Besides, it'd be more annoying if you found out about it later and there was some kind of mix-up. Watching the reaction, attempting to explain things, it would all be such a waste of time that I thought we'd just cut all of that out."

Nothing timid about Yoshino-san.

"I see."

Mami-san relented. It seemed it was hard for her to protest to the plan so boldly laid out in front of her. Last year's dates had all taken place near K Station, and the head of the newspaper club, Tsukiyama Minako-sama, had disguised herself and lurked in that area. Yoshino-san was silently saying that such behavior was not acceptable, and trying to stop it.

"Well then, how about we settle on Sunday week."

The coming Sunday would be too soon, not giving them enough time to work on the plan for the date. Just like that, the trio (Shimako-san, Yoshino-san and Yumi) decided on the day. Of course, they acknowledged that if this didn't suit their partners, then they'd have to change it.

"Mami-san, is that okay with you?"

Yoshino-san asked, and the response was an affirmative, "As you wish."
Apparently, Mami-san could handle defiance as well.

"At any rate, what kind of person is this Igawa Ami?"

Noriko-chan asked, now that the conversation had reached a natural break, as she flicked the application form of the winner of the absentee's chance draw.

They were both first-years, but since they weren't in the same class or clubs, they had no point of contact. Was Noriko-chan's bad mood caused by indignation about how her beloved onee-sama was being manipulated, or because she found it hard to stomach the idea of her beloved onee-sama going on a date with someone else? It looked as though she'd been silently thinking about Igawa Ami-san during the entire time Yumi, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san had been deciding on the day of the dates.

"I wonder."

There was only one entry in the absentee's chance draw that said either, "In the car park," or, "Under a car," making Ami-san the closest entrant, by far. Despite that, she didn't want to be seen together with Shimako-san. She didn't even want to come to the Rose Mansion, because it would draw too much attention to her.

"Maybe she's a fan of Yumi-san or Yoshino-san ... ?"

Mami-san offered.

"I considered that too, however."

Shimako-san continued with, "I don't think it's that," and Mami-san quickly took back her words.

"Right. Regardless of whose card she was initially aiming for, it's unlikely to be the cause of her obstinate desire to stay out of the limelight."

Suppose, purely for argument's sake, that this girl admired Yumi or Yoshino-san, and she wasn't happy with Shimako-san, then surely she would have been better off waiving her right when Shimako-san first came around and informed her of it. If she thought that going on a date with Shimako-san

would bring her closer to the other Rose families, then surely she wouldn't have passed up the opportunity to come to the Rose Mansion.

"Even if she wants to stay out of the limelight, as soon as that report hits the Lillian Kwaraban, she's going to be outed."

Just what were these current first-years thinking? Mami-san, perhaps on account of being in the same second-year pine class as Yumi and Yoshino-san, also found herself grumbling about kids these days.

Part 2.

In the end, not even a single prize winner chose to attend the explanatory meeting about the half-day date.

Yoshino stopped in at the second-year chrysanthemum class on her way to school that day, to touch base with Tanuma Chisato-san.

"About the explanatory meeting scheduled for today, we've made some changes for the participants."

Chisato-san asked what was meant by that, but then dismissed it saying, "Ah, don't bother."

"It's after school, right? Voluntary attendance? You'll give me a document with the main points later? No major changes from last year? In that case, I don't really think I need to attend."

That's probably the benefit of being last year's victor. Of course she didn't have to go, but what's up with that – that tone she used.

"Even though you don't have to go, won't you come along anyway?"

Quickly recovering from the slight, Yoshino tried one more push. Thereupon, the boss nonchalantly said:

"That's not going to happen. Because of my obligations, I'd never considered attending."

"Huh?"

"You see, I've got club activities today."

"Ah."

With that, realization dawned on Yoshino.

"Don't 'Ah,' me. It's been a long time since you've attended. And the event's over now, so it's about time you came back to the kendo club."

"... I suppose."

"Even though you've got a dojo right next door, you're just going home and not even touching your shinai, aren't you?"

"... Yeah."

Talk about kicking over the hornet's nest. Yoshino had been skipping out on club activities, using the election and the event as an excuse. Because Rei-chan wouldn't be there, and it was cold.

It'd been so long since she'd been, that the day they had club practice had slipped her mind.

(I see.)

Because it had been planned without any regard to the schedules of whoever may have found the cards, the explanatory meeting was bound to be canceled. If they hold the event again next year, they'd be better off waiting until the winners were known before setting a date and time for the meeting, or else being a bit more forceful about the requirement to attend. Yoshino made a mental note to tell Mami-san about this later.

"The third-years hardly ever stop by, so there's plenty of space, and now's not the time for you to be missing practice. If things stay like they are, spring will come, new first-years will join, and you'll still be the worst in the club."

That's speaking quite frankly. Yoshino endured the parts she couldn't refute. Like the frozen dojo floor first thing on a winter's morning.

"Pardon my intrusion, I'll be leaving now."

If she rattled the bushes any more, the only thing that would come out would be more trouble. Yoshino decided to beat a hasty retreat.

"Ah, Yoshino-san."

Yoshino thought, "What now?" as she stopped, and Chisato-san said:

"About the plans for the date – since it's a prize for the winner, we can go wherever I want, right?"

"That's correct."

Yoshino looked behind her. It was a bit rude, but she didn't really have any great expectations for the date with Chisato-san. Her feelings were that if there was somewhere Chisato-san wanted to go, then by all means, go ahead.

"Then leave it to me. I'll come up with a brilliant plan and show it to you later."

"Alright, thanks."

Yoshino bowed to Chisato-san, then started walking away once more.

(Just what would be brilliant with you and me...)

As Yoshino walked down the corridor, each and every student she passed seemed to be in a better mood than her.

That was the morning's conversation.

Lunch time. Noriko-chan appeared in the Rose Mansion and apologetically said:

"It seems Touko won't be attending the explanatory meeting. She said she'd be fine with just the print out explaining it. For some reason, outside of class, she's hard to get hold of ... Please forgive me."

Watching this from the side, Yoshino thought, "You're only classmates, there's no need to feel so responsible." The heartfelt apology made the circumstances surrounding it look quite tawdry.

"It's okay, don't worry about it."

Yumi-san soothed.

"None of them are coming. It's better this way. Instead, I feel bad about using you as a messenger, Noriko-chan."

For doing something that the person herself was supposed to do, in other words.

"That's fine. If you'd come to our classroom, Yumi-sama, it would have just been a wild goose chase."

"Because she's hard to get hold of? Is she running away from her classmates?"

Touko-chan was the girl of the moment. Perhaps Igawa Ami-san was exercising such extreme caution because she didn't want to end up like that.

"I don't really know. She's there during class, but when there's a break she just seems to go missing."

Yumi-san listened to Noriko-chan's explanation, then folded her arms and looked at the ceiling before muttering, "Is that so."

That was the lunch conversation.

Which brings us to the after-school conversation.

(None of the card holders will attend the explanatory meeting. I guess that's how it goes.)

Yoshino shook her head as she walked down the corridor. No-one shows up to such a boring meeting if it's not compulsory, usually.

Since the planned explanatory meeting had been canceled, they'd also canceled their after-school get together.

(Ah, I'm bored.)

Shimako-san had gone to her previously scheduled periodic meeting with Igawa Ami-san.

Judging by their earlier conversation, Yumi-san had gone searching for Touko-chan.

What would Noriko-chan be doing? Since the meeting had been canceled, perhaps she'd gone home early for a change.

Even if there wasn't a meeting, and even if she was by herself, she could go to the Rose Mansion, take it easy and drink some tea. But she'd feel a bit guilty about that, so Yoshino didn't think that was an option.

(Club activities? I could go to that.)

It had been so long since she'd been that, in truth, it was a bit tough. It was unavoidable while she'd still been busy, but after that excuse had run out she'd just been avoiding it because it was bothersome, which made the barrier grow much higher.

It wasn't just because of what Chisato-san said, but Yoshino didn't want to appear pathetic to the new club members in spring. Having a third-year student who was so hopeless would be a hard sell. Even though she'd only started practicing kendo in second-year, who would know that when they

first met her? She'd be better off making a note that said that and pinning it to her chest.

(New students ...)

As she was thinking that she should head to the martial arts building, Yoshino realized that she had arrived at the middle-school building. Her legs must have automatically headed in this direction while she'd been thinking about the new club members.

Quickly, she headed towards the middle-school third-year classrooms. Without being summoned, Nana appeared in the hallway.

"Ah, gokigenyou."

When she noticed Yoshino, she said a few words to the students she'd been talking to then rushed over. Was that merely innocence? Or a misunderstanding of her feelings.

"Was there something you wanted from me?"

"Do you have a minute?"

"Yes, of course."

Since Yoshino had come all the way here to see her, Nana-chan was clever enough to realize that she obviously wanted to talk to her about something.

"Good job on the Valentine's Day event."

"Thanks."

Good job indeed. Yoshino was trying to prolong it so much that it even brought her all the way out here. Although a girl two years her junior was hardly going to complain about that.

"And the yellow card was found."

"Pretty much."

"That's great, isn't it?"

"Great!?"

Yoshino couldn't believe her ears when she heard what Nana said.

"Well, the card was hidden so that it could be found, right?"

Nana said, looking puzzled.

"Well, that's true, but even so."

Because it had been found on the day, the absentees wouldn't get their chance in the draw. And since the middle-school students were only allowed to enter the absentee's chance draw, they wouldn't have a shot at the card or the half-day date.

Was she really okay with that? Yoshino was going to ask, but swallowed the words. After all, how did Nana view her existence? Thinking about that, everything became clear. Nana didn't mind whether she won or lost.

"I put in an entry too. But I was completely wrong, I didn't even think about the outside wall of the staff room."

"... I see."

Tentatively, she then gave the answer to be checked. Perhaps hoping to bring it to a close. The disappointment was because she'd had such high hopes.

"I wrote down the martial arts building."

Nana said.

"Hmm, really?"

Yoshino responded, not showing much enthusiasm. Actually, Yoshino knew that without having to ask. Yesterday at lunch, when they'd been sorting through the absentee's entries, Yumi-san had spotted Nana's entry form and handed it to her.

"That was way off."

In other words, Yoshino was a member of the kendo club, so the martial arts building. It was too simple, and would have been found annoyingly fast. Give it a little more thought. And the martial arts building – at least write down where in the building you thought it would be.

"Yeah, it was a bad guess. But it seemed the obvious choice, so I had to go with it."

Even in that case, you should have at least narrowed it down, Nana-chan. Just on principle, Yoshino was mortified once more.

"But I was completely wrong. I'm glad Yoshino-sama chose a far more interesting place than I had imagined. And I'm thankful that you allowed us middle-school students the chance to participate."

Nana said, her eyes shining with gratitude. Based on that expression, Yoshino knew Nana wasn't just saying it to be polite, it was what she truly believed.

(...)

Had she been thinking that she wouldn't be able to participate, even though Yoshino had informed her about it? Surely some amount of expectation was good?

"I'm not sure I really understand. You're saying that overall you were happy with the event, including the outcome?"

"Of course."

Nana smiled, as though to say, "You still don't get it?"

"Even though you only participated, that's okay?"

Yoshino omitted to say whether the other option was overall victory or a reward.

"Yeah, you see."

The next moment, Nana said something completely unexpected.

"I can go on a date with Yoshino-sama any time."

"Ah."

– It goes without saying that, after that, Yoshino gleefully threw herself into her club activities.

Part 3.

"Shimako-sama."

Shimako was standing in front of the shelf of dictionaries in the library when a voice called to her from behind. She was about to turn around until she heard a whispered, "Stay like that."

"Won't you take a seat at that table?"

The location she was pointed to was a simple table divided into three sections, each with its own light and chair. It was more suited to solitary study than a group discussion. At present, the right-hand section was being used by another student, but the middle and left-hand sections were free.

"Very well."

Shimako nodded, and walked over to the table. She debated for a while about which chair to take, before deciding on the middle one.

"Pardon me."

She excused herself to the student already seated at the table, then took her chair. When she did, the girl on the right's shoulders seemed to flinch. Perhaps it was because she'd done something unexpected, like sitting across two seats on a train that was going to get crowded.

Even though Shimako had taken her seat, there was no indication that the left seat would be filled. After about a minute, as Shimako was starting to look around, wondering what happened, Igawa Ami-san sat down beside her. If another student hadn't come around looking for a free seat, perhaps she would have been made to wait another two or three minutes.

"Gokigenyou."

Although Shimako thought it unlikely that people would connect them even without the delay between taking their seats, Ami-san undoubtedly considered it a necessary precaution.

"I apologize for the trouble I'm putting you through."

The same blunt manner as always. The difference was she was being more polite.

"Here. This is from the head of the newspaper club – it's the documentation regarding our date."

Underneath the table, Shimako held out the printout so that her neighbor could take it.

"Ah. It's 4,000 yen this year."

Ami-san muttered, quickly scanning the paper.

"You know about last year?"

Shimako asked.

"Yeah. I looked it up, for reference. It was in one of the back issues of the Lillian Kwaraban."

"I see."

They were whispering, but since they were right next to each other their voices carried far enough. Because of the separation, from a distance it would look like they were each working on different things. Ami-san had a book open and was pretending to read, such was the extent she was going to.

"Most things are about the same as last year. That's good."

"It is?"

"Yeah, actually."

This time Ami-san passed a piece of paper to Shimako under the table, apparently she'd already worked out a plan. It was written in pencil on a piece of lined paper.

"This is ... "

When Shimako saw the densely packed schedule that covered every place and time, from their meeting to their parting, she was lost for words. Shimako didn't know much about this girl, so she hadn't really been expecting anything, and this was definitely 'nothing.'

"Ah, you know, Ami-san."

"Yes?"

"The date is a reward for the winner, so we can go wherever you would like to go. That's what we were meeting here to discuss, right?"

Shimako said, still unsure of how best to convey this. Had Ami-san come up with this plan, thinking it was for the best?

"Yeah. Of course I know that."

The response seemed to say, "Why are you saying this now?"

"... So you see."

It looked like she'd studied last year's Lillian Kwaraban in quite some detail. How to approach this, so that her feelings weren't hurt.

"If you're using last year as a guide, the winner, Kanina Shizuka-sama, let her classmates plan out their date, and I just went along with it."

Not everything that happened during last year's date was included in the Lillian Kwaraban article. And, of course, the events that happened after Shizuka-sama had gone home (including the appearance of Satou Sei-sama) were not recorded either. Despite that, when reading the article it probably looked as though that date had been planned for Shimako. Although what Ami-san hoped to achieve by taking her on a date she'd already experienced, Shimako didn't really know.

"Is that right?"

Ami-san murmured. Then, while it seemed that she understood, she followed that up immediately with, "Might as well make the most of it." It looked like she had no intention of withdrawing the piece of paper that Shimako held in her hand.

"I think the location's fine. Or do you dislike it? Would it make you uncomfortable?"

She wasn't willing to give an inch, as though it were her last line of defense. It may just have been Ami-san's natural voice, but the way she spoke now seemed to be more pressing.

"Not at all. If that's what you want Ami-san, then I have no objection."

"That's good. Then I'll go home and rework this, expect something even better."

Their conversation had barely concluded and Ami-san was already standing up.

"But, why here?"

Shimako asked, as she held the piece of paper out for Ami-san.

"Because,"

The next moment, Ami-san said something completely unexpected.

"I'm a fan of Rosa Gigantea."

Once more, Shimako was left worrying incessantly.

Part 4.

Yumi found Touko-chan in front of the clubhouse.

"We finally meet."

"... Ah."

When Touko-chan appeared she'd been jogging, as though in a hurry, but when she saw Yumi she stopped, as though resigned.

"Gokigenyou."

Seeing her natural, unforced smile, Yumi's chest swelled. There was no doubting that she was seeing Touko-chan's true face.

"What brings you here?"

Touko-chan asked, leaning against the clubhouse wall.

"When I went to peek on the drama club's activities in the gymnasium, they said that you were probably here."

"Is that so?"

"You're practicing a play for the third-years' send-off, right?"

"Yeah. We decided to split into three groups and do three short scenes. Since I'm doing a two-person play, it doesn't matter if we don't have a lot of room, so we decided to come here."

Touko-chan said, looking up at the building.

"I knew it. I didn't think you'd be running away."

Hearing Yumi's words, Touko-chan smiled bitterly.

"It's unavoidable that people would think that, since I'm not in the classroom. Some of my classmates know about this, but there's a certain credibility to me running away to avoid the inquisitive eyes and barrage of questions. The truth of me having to leave for club activities is a bit of a let down."

"It seems Noriko-chan doesn't know either."

"Ah, my mistake, I forgot to tell her. Plus she looks like she's been busy with things at the Rose Mansion, so I've just missed her a couple of times."

"She's worried about you. You should find a chance to explain things."

"Understood. I'll do that."

Touko-chan replied meekly. Her docility was a bit anticlimactic. In truth, Yumi was perplexed.

"Did you come to talk about the date?"

"Yeah ... More or less."

There was something else they had to discuss too. But it would get chaotic if matters weren't handled one at a time, so Yumi decided to go with this talk first.

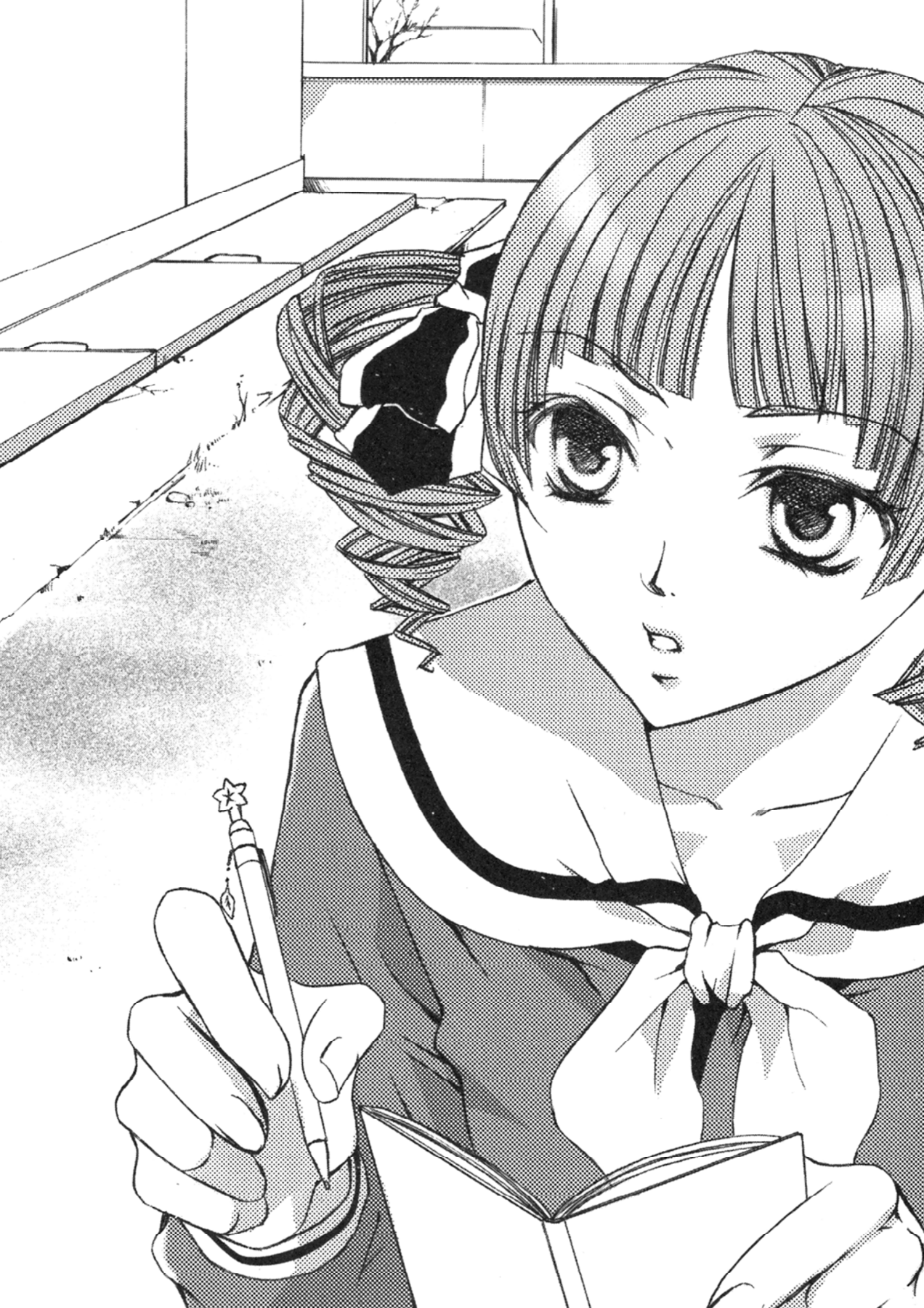
"As for the day, how does Sunday week, so not this Sunday but the next, work for you?"

"That day is fine."

Touko-chan responded immediately.

"Is there somewhere you'd like to go?"

Yumi asked as she watched Touko-chan take out her school notebook and jot down a reminder for the date. Touko-chan thought for a while, then raised her head.



"Is it okay if we go somewhere I want to?"

"Of course. It can still only be a day trip, and it has to fit within the budget though."

Yumi held out the printout that Mami-san had prepared which explained the conditions.

"I see. 4000 yen, so that's 2000 per person. If it all goes on travel, that's only 1000 yen each way. You can't get very far on that. And even if you do, there's nothing left over for food ... "

Touko-chan mumbled as she skimmed over the conditions.

"But if we go somewhere using our commuter pass, that's 2000 yen each for lunch, right?"

"Ah, that's true."

They both laughed. They had such wildly different ideas about how to use the 4000 yen for the date, and whether it was a modest or extravagant sum.

This time around, the three groups were all going on dates under the same conditions, but the shape of those dates was likely to be completely different.

Shimako-san was going with a first-year that, until now, she knew absolutely nothing about. Yoshino-san was going with someone that she had previously looked upon as a rival, but was now a fellow second-year club member. And then.

Yumi looked at Touko-chan. The person that she might soon call her petit soeur.

They had to talk about that properly. Yumi had caught Touko-chan today, but she didn't know when they'd have a chance to talk next.

" ... To-"

Just as Yumi started to say her name, someone above her called out, "Touko-chan?"

They both looked up at the same time. The window on the second-floor of the clubhouse opened, and a student stuck her head out and looked down at them.

They were in the same grade, so Yumi knew the girl's face ... Right, she was the president of the drama club.

"I was getting worried since you were taking so long to come back."

Then she saw Yumi standing next to Touko-chan and said, "Ah."

"I'm sorry. You're in the middle of something. It's cold, right? Why don't you both come inside?"

"That's okay."

Yumi turned to look at her, then called back. It was certainly cold, but if they went into the clubhouse, she wouldn't be able to say what she wanted to.

She wanted to say those words to Touko-chan alone. They weren't something to be said in front of other people.

"I'm sorry I interrupted your club activities. We'll be done soon."

"Really? Don't worry about that. It's just the two of us anyway."

Take your time, she said as she closed the window.

"Well then."

Touko-chan folded the printout and put it in her pocket.

"Ah, yeah."

Even though they hadn't been hurried on, perhaps she was worried about keeping the club president waiting.

Touko-chan bowed, then turned away.

(Ah.)

To make her stop, a single word was needed.

To make her stop, a single word. Then just hand over the rosary. It would take less than a minute.

(Wait.)

Yumi's right hand reached out to Touko-chan.

Whether she felt something or not, before Yumi could say a single word, Touko-chan looked back over her shoulder.

"Umm, Yumi-sama."

The next moment, Touko-chan said something completely unexpected.

"I'd like to wait until after our date to hear your reply."

The reply she referred to could only be one thing.

"Huh?"

Even though it would take less than a minute.

In the end, Yumi had to wait at least another week.

At the Outset of the Date

Part 1.

Without going into every little detail, the days passed quickly enough.

It was the Sunday of the week following the treasure hunt. Right on 11am.

Yoshino stepped into the plaza on the first floor of the JR K Station building.

"Ah. Yoshino-san, gokigenyou."

Who knows what time she got there, but Tanuma Chisato-san was already at their appointed meeting place, and when she saw Yoshino she smiled and waved gently.

She was wearing the same coat that she'd had on for her date with Reichan last year, but underneath that she was clearly wearing a pair of jeans and sneakers. A huge departure from the red, white and pink fluffy skirt. It seemed obvious, but her style probably reflected her emotional involvement in the date. But then again, Yoshino was wearing something similar, so they were at least equal in that regard.

"... Gokigenyou."

Stifling a yawn, Yoshino started by returning the greeting. Not good. She'd had a little nap in the car, and that seemed to have encouraged her weariness, so try as she might to fight it off it kept assailing her.

"Did you ride here?"

In response to Chisato-san's question, Yoshino shook her head.

"Huh, you caught the bus!?"

The accusatory tone she used was quite offensive.

"I did not. My father drove me here in his car."

Before she knew it, it was past the time when she would have had to leave to make it to their date by bike.

"Well, I guess that can't be helped."

"It's alright for you, Chisato-san. You can get to K Station using your commuter pass. But I walk to school. Telling me to come by bike to save on travel costs, that's not fair."

"I said it can't be helped, didn't I? Stop trying to pick a fight."

"But your tone of voice was annoying. It was my father's car, so that should be fine. In the report, we can just say I rode here if you want."

"What are you going to do about getting home? We're on a really tight budget, you know."

"I'll pay for it myself."

Even Rei-chan, last year she secretly put in some of her own money, so as long as it wasn't written about in the report, it should be fine.

"If you start saying that sort of thing, where will it end?"

Then Chisato-san went on a bit of a rant about how the date would be fun staying within the budget, and that there would be others who would try to copy their date, so they had to keep to the allotted amount.

"Well, it's fine. There should be enough left over for your bus fare home. Let's go. Time's wasting."

In the end, if you're just going to say, "It's fine," then don't bother bringing up the complaint to begin with. Yoshino stuck her tongue out behind Chisato-san's back. Chisato-san didn't notice this, and continued on, almost skipping as she walked ahead.

(Oh geeze.)

If things were like this right at the start, would they really be able to get along for their date?

At the very least, Yoshino thought that nobody would want to copy their date.

The place they headed to first was the cinema. The one building contained lots of movie theaters, and they had a few different movies playing simultaneously.

"Two high-school students."

As Chisato-san held out her hand to pay at the ticket counter, Yoshino firmly grabbed it. As if to say, hey, hold on a minute.

"Owww, that hurts, what are you doing?"

What are you doing? Yoshino thought she should be the one saying that.

"Chisato-san. Why are you taking me to this sickly-sweet romance comedy, and acting as though it's the most natural thing in the world?"

"Why? You like it, right? This sort of thing."

"I like it? This sort of thing?"

Yoshino snarled. She'd only seen the TV commercials for this movie, but it was a drama set in France about a beautiful man and woman and how they meet, break up, cross paths, fall in love, overcome obstacles and flirt.

"Huh? A subscriber to Comsos Publishing hates love stories?"

"That's Rei-chan's preference. Mine's something more like this."

Yoshino pointed at one of the giant posters on the wall. The one on the right-hand edge of the four. A young, clean-shaven samurai stood back-to-back with a grizzled old ronin, both had their katana drawn. Incidentally, the other three posters were for the romance movie that Chisato-san had requested, a horror movie, and a kid's anime.

"Ah, don't tell me you like the blue Cosmos books?"

"... You're way off."

Just to explain:

As everyone knows, Cosmos Publishing was the label used by the Kyuuteisha publishing company for books aimed at teenage girls. Within that, blue was used to designate BL, or boys-love stories. They were called that because the color blue was used for the covers. And, as the name implied, a boys-love story was a love story between two boys – well, it could instead be between a man and a boy, or two men – at any rate, there were plenty of girls who preferred reading about love between two males than between a male and a female.

And that's fine for them, but unfortunately Yoshino wasn't one of them. Since she wasn't particularly happy about letting that misunderstanding continue, Yoshino decided to correct Chisato-san.

"What I like isn't the love between two men, it's swordplay between two men."

"Wha?"

"The Lillian Kawaraban got our surveys mixed up. A couple of issues later they printed a tiny correction notice. Got it? Try to remember. What I mostly read is sword-fighting novels."

"Ohh. I only saw the article about your hobbies in the Lillian Kawaraban. Maybe if they'd printed Rei-sama's photo next to the correction."

Well, that sounds about right, Yoshino agreed.

"But, you know, anyone who even jokingly calls themselves a fan of Rei-chan would surely have noticed that her favorite books are from Cosmos Publishing."

She was often carrying them around, and when they released a new book in her favorite series she'd spend her lunch-time reading it.

"Ahh. I thought she might be reading them to fit in with you, Yoshino-san."

"No. Just no."

"Oh, so what about this. It said that your hobby was knitting, was that actually Rei-sama?"

"That's right."

"Ohh, so that's how it is. The mystery is solved."

Chisato-san smiled gleefully.

"What mystery?"

"Yoshino-san, during last year's treasure hunt, you were desperately flipping through the pages of a sewing book, right? I never understood the significance of that. But now, thanks to this, I feel relieved."

Yoshino didn't really understand what Chisato-san was trying to say, or what she was relieved about.

"Well, in that case, why don't you make me feel relieved too?"

Yoshino leaned in a bit closer and forced a smile.

"Huh?"

"The movie, let's go to the action one. 'Young Samurai vs Ronin: Ball and Tusk.' Sounds good, yeah?"

"Nope. I'd always planned that we'd see this one, 'Paris, Arrondissement 21, Je'taime.' And since the date is my reward, we can go wherever I want."

"That's fine. We're at the place you wanted to go to. I didn't say I objected to the cinema. But you can't just go ahead and decide what movie we're going to see by yourself."

"What are you saying? We met at 11 so that we'd be in time for the 11:30 screening. Of course we're going to see this movie."

"'Young Samurai' starts at 11:15, so we can still make it."

Yoshino said, pointing to the session times listed above the ticket counter.

"Buh-boow. It's already 11:16."

Chisato-san said, looking pointedly at her wristwatch. However, Yoshino wasn't going to give up that easily.

"The previews go for 5 or 10 minutes. If we go now, we'll still get there for the film."

"At any rate, no."

"But I – "

In truth, it wasn't as though Yoshino was so annoyed by love stories that she broke out in a rash. If she watched the movie they were discussing, she'd probably enjoy it, more or less. She was only being so obstinate because it's what her partner wanted to see. The mood was such that if she backed down here, then that would mean she was defeated.

"This is a date. We can't go and see different movies."

"I know that."

But having said that, neither of them were willing to take the high road and watch the other's movie.

It wasn't obvious who moved first, but they both drew their right hand back. Scissors-paper-rock.

Go!

"Ahh!"

So much energy. They both went for rock.

"It's a draw ... I guess."

The next time around, they both went for paper.

After that it was rock, paper, paper, scissors. The run of ties made it look as though they really were well suited to each other.

They were both breathing heavily. Even though it was only scissors-paper-rock, they were both going at it hard, using their entire body, and they were getting tired. While this was going on, the clock ticked over to 11:20. The "Young Samurai" previews would surely be over by now.

"Hey, why don't we get someone else to decide instead?"

Chisato-san offered. If they kept going like this, it would never end. In other words, if they couldn't decide themselves, all they could do was entrust it to someone else.

"Alright, but how?"

"We'll go to the same movie as the next customer."

"But doesn't that put me at a disadvantage, in a number of ways."

By saying that, Yoshino was acknowledging that she was disadvantaged because her movie had already started. She looked around the cinema entrance. Then she spotted a guy running from the train station straight towards them.

"Okay, let's see the same movie as the next person."

A single male wouldn't be going to see 'Paris, Arrondissement 21, Je'taime.' He would definitely choose 'Young Samurai vs Ronin: Ball and Tusk.'

"Okay."

Chisato-san agreed, as the running man looked back over his shoulder.

"Ah."

Damn it, Yoshino thought. A woman was following along behind him. A couple might see 'Paris.' Scratch that. It's probably the more likely choice. 'Je'taime', and all that.

"Looks like victory is mine."

Chisato-san smiled, confident in her success.

"Wait, we don't know that."

Once again, Yoshino stopped Chisato-san as she went to buy the tickets.

"Since they're in such a hurry, they might be going to see 'Young Samurai' after all."

They might be hurrying because the previews were already over. And the guy had gone on ahead to buy the tickets, since he was the faster runner.

"It's simply because they want good seats."

"We don't know that."

The guy was running. The girl was running too. In a way, the scene was more suspenseful than a movie.

"Oddly enough, they might keep running past the cinema."

"Hahaha. In that case, it carries over to the next person."

However, that concern was unnecessary.

The male of the pair that they thought were a couple arrived at the entrance to the cinema, then got his breathing under control as he walked over to the ticket counter.

Well then, which one will it be. Yoshino and Chisato-san nervously awaited the outcome. Well, they didn't really have much time to really take it all in. They followed him, because they had to buy the same tickets.

Without hesitation, he stood in front of one of the ticket windows.

(Huh?)

"Two adults."

The ticket window wasn't for either of the movies that Yoshino and Chisato-san had been expecting.

"Did you get them?"

The pair locked arms, and headed towards the movie theater entrance.

"Please hurry. The movie will start any moment now. Next customer?"

The lady at the ticket counter addressed the two that had been left behind, dumbstruck.

There was no point in complaining. It was a rod that they'd made for their own back.

"Two high-school students."

The tickets that had despairingly been purchased were for:

" ... 'The Tale of the Blood-stained Mansion.'"

– As suggested by the title, this was quite obviously a horror film.

Part 2.

At the same time, Shimako was in the food area in the department store basement.

She was conscious of the girl in the Lillian's high-school uniform who was separated from her by the crowd of people but kept popping in and out of her field of vision, and for the umpteenth time that day silently asked herself, "Why?"

Why was she going on the exact same date as last year?

(No.)

The 'exact same' was a faulty expression.

Last year, Shimako had purchased onigiri rice balls, but the plastic bag that currently hung from her right hand contained a warm marinated seafood and vegetables dish, and the paper bag in her left hand contained baked cheesecake.

(Moreover.)

Last year they'd worn street clothes, while this year they were in uniform. And, let's not forget, her partner was different too.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting. Did you make your purchases?"

"Yes. This is the cake. And this is the seafood."

As she said this, Shimako held out the change. A couple of ten- and one-yen coins. Since she'd bought exactly what she'd been told, the money she'd been given was almost exactly spot on.

"But three-hundred grams of each, don't you think it's a bit too much?"

Perhaps not hearing what Shimako said, Ami-san opened her own bags and looked at what she had bought.

"Fried chicken and onigiri. You don't have a microwave in the Rose Mansion, do you?"

"Ah, no."

"There was some really tasty looking pizza, but I decided against it. No matter how good it looks, when it cools the cheese hardens, and it won't taste the same."

"That's true."

As they headed towards the bus terminal on the north side of the station, Shimako was deep in thought. Was Ami-san enjoying their date?

The girl by her side was heading directly to the exit, her head fixed looking straight ahead.

She'd called herself a fan of Shimako's. Yet, since the first time they'd met, Ami-san had never looked at her with a happy expression.

At first, Shimako had thought this was because she was nervous. But they'd met a couple of times while planning the date. Surely she should have loosened up during that.

So then Shimako thought that maybe this was just her nature. That her face was normally expressionless, that such was her personality, and that Shimako wasn't the only one that she looked at with a stony expression.

However, that was incorrect.

One day during the previous week, Shimako had been walking with Noriko through the corridor on the first-floor of the school building.

It was one of those rare mild February days, with few clouds, and you could almost mistake it for April or May. Consequently, there were a lot of students who had taken their lunches out into the courtyard and were chatting merrily, and Shimako could feel that energy as they walked through the corridor.

"Ah."

Noriko called out, drawing close to the glass window.

"It's her, right, Shimako-san?"

Where Noriko pointed did indeed include Igawa Ami-san's figure. She was with another of her classmates, and they were leaning against the wall of the opposite building, obviously talking about something or other.

"How did you know?"

Shimako asked. Knowing Ami-san's desire to avoid any outside attention, Noriko would never have gone to her classroom and asked after her. Then, somewhat awkwardly, Noriko admitted:

"I was worried about what kind of person she was, so, this morning, I waited near her shoe-box. That girl was the one who opened the peach group locker with 'Igawa' written on it, and changed into the indoor shoes kept inside ... I'm sorry."

"It's alright, you don't have to apologize."

It was unlikely that anyone could get the wrong impression from the first-year Noriko-chan being in the first-year shoe-box area.

"So, what did you think?"

Shimako asked, as she looked at Ami-san. Since Noriko had been worried about what sort of person Ami-san was, Shimako wanted to hear her impressions on seeing the real deal.

"We-ll. She did seem a bit different to the image I got from you, Shimako-san, but it definitely looked like there was a part of her like that."

"I see."

Even Shimako herself felt that occasionally. Just what kind of person was Ami-san really?

At that moment.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, Ami-san laughed. The classmate standing beside her laughed too. It must have been very funny, because they were slapping each other on the shoulder as they laughed together.

"Like a different person ... "

Noriko's dumbfounded voice made its way to Shimako's ears.

Ami-san and her friend, unaware that they were being watched by the white Rose sisters, continued to laugh.

So, given that, Shimako was unable to come to a satisfactory conclusion.

The Ami-san that she'd seen in the courtyard that day may have been the real Ami-san. That would mean that Shimako being her partner was the problem after all. Perhaps she'd unknowingly put some burden on her shoulders, or caused her to be on guard.

"Rosa Gigantea."

Hearing this, Shimako looked towards Ami-san, and saw the bus that went past Lillian's Girls Academy pulling into the terminal.

"Please get on ahead of me. I'll follow some time later."

"Okay."

As instructed, Shimako obediently boarded the bus. She didn't bother to ask why. She'd become accustomed to this pattern.

Since the bus had only just arrived, it was quite empty inside. Even though she knew no-one was going to sit beside her, Shimako sat down at one of the double seats towards the back of the bus. Filling the window seat, leaving the aisle seat open.

Inside the bus, with neither the sound of the engine nor the announcer, Shimako idly watched the world go by outside. She hadn't checked the timetable but the bus would probably head out again soon.

Two girls were laughing as they walked across the pedestrian crossing in front of the train station.

(Oh.)

Shimako had thought something looked familiar about them, then realized it was Mami-san and Hidemi-san. If it had just been one or the other, then it's possible that it could have been a case of mistaken identity since they weren't wearing their school uniforms, but seeing both of them together left no doubt.

(They look like they're having fun.)

It was possible that they weren't on a date but were instead collecting information on the dates. Even so, seeing that pair enjoying themselves so much caused a feeling of jealousy to swell up in Shimako's heart. She wondered if she and Ami-san would be able to laugh together like that.

A girl in a Lillian's uniform boarded the bus. For a moment Shimako thought it was Ami-san, but it wasn't. After showing her commuter pass, the girl took a seat right behind the driver.

The driver started the engine. Just as the door started to close, Ami-san hurriedly got on board. As Shimako expected, Ami-san didn't sit down beside her, instead choosing a single seat right in the middle of the bus. Perhaps she would have sat beside her if there wasn't that other Lillian's student in the front. Who knows.

"Thank-you for riding with us again today, this bus is – "

The announcer called out, and the bus slowly started to move.

They were going from the front of the train station to the front of Lillian's Girls Academy. But they were both still separated.

Even though they were taking the same route as last year, Shimako had the feeling they would be very different dates.

Part 3.

Winding the clock back a bit.

It's 8:50am. Yumi is at M station.

They had arranged to meet at 9, but she hadn't been sure what traffic would be like on a Sunday morning, so she'd left home with plenty of time to spare. The roads hadn't been all that busy but the bus hadn't arrived on time. As a result, she'd arrived just a little bit early.

Yumi waited in a place where she could see the ticket gate, and five minutes later Touko-chan appeared.

"Gokigenyou."

Beneath a shortish red coat Touko-chan was wearing a long denim skirt. She had on short-heeled shoes, or, rather, fashionable leather boots. Seeing her outfit, Yumi reflexively let out a sigh of relief.

"That's good. It seems my choices weren't too out of line."

"Huh?"

"I mean, you said we were going on a mystery tour, so I couldn't take into account our destination. I'd been puzzling over what to wear the entire time."

At that point, Touko-chan finally understood, and said, "Ahh."

Incidentally, a mystery tour is one where the participants don't know the destination until they arrive. The lady that lives next door to Yumi said she and her friends go on them quite often, and it's all anticipation and excitement as they don't know where they're going, or whether to buy souvenirs along the way, and so on. The previous year, she'd brought a salted salmon back as a souvenir from her mystery tour, and shared it with the Fukuzawa family.

Well, with only 2000 yen each, they weren't going to be participating in any group travel booking. So while it was still a mystery, today's was a budget tour that traveler Matsudaira had wracked her brains to come up with.

"See, if I'd worn a frilly skirt and we went mountain climbing, it wouldn't end well. But if I wore jeans and a t-shirt then they wouldn't let us in at a fancy restaurant."

People varied their clothes based on where they were going.

"Since we have to be back within the day, even if we went mountain climbing it wouldn't be that big of a mountain, so a skirt wouldn't be a problem. And if we were having a 2000-yen lunch, then there's no restaurant around here that would refuse you entry just because you're in jeans, right?"

Touko-chan said. In other words, it wasn't something worth getting too worried about.

"Well, I guess. Still, you called it a mystery, so I didn't know what to expect."

Consequently, Yumi had decided against jeans, instead going with beige wool slacks and a black turtle-neck sweater, then throwing on her usual duffel coat as she left. She'd initially put on her sneakers, then thought better of it, and swapped them for her mother's short-length boots.

But seeing what Touko-chan was wearing had filled her with confidence. It appeared they weren't going mountain climbing or to a fancy restaurant.

"Well, shall we get going?"

"But, what about the tickets?"

Yumi asked, pointing at the ticket machines. Touko-chan may have had a train pass, but Yumi went to school by bus, so she'd have to buy a ticket to get past the gate.

"We won't be buying them here. There's no need to."

"Huh?"

True to her words, Touko-chan headed away from the ticket gates. She continued on, pushing her way through the waves of people, and heading down the stairs.

And then.

"First we'll be taking a bus."

Touko-chan said, then headed towards a bus terminal that serviced a different company to the one Yumi took to school.

"Why?"

Part 1.

The bus stopped in front of Lillian's Girls Academy, discharged the three uniform-clad girls, then resumed its journey.

"Please go on ahead to the Rose Mansion. I'll follow you in a little while."

Ami-san instructed Shimako after they had descended the steps.

Shimako had thought that since they'd come here, they wouldn't have to worry about drawing any unwanted attention. But this was their school after all, and perhaps because of that Ami-san was being extra cautious, so in the end Shimako just followed her orders without objecting.

Unlike last year's date, the main gate was open today despite it being Sunday.

"Working hard I see. Which club are you with?"

The security guard cheerfully called out once she was inside.

"Oh. The, ah, student council."

Surprised by the unexpected question, Shimako answered without considering it. She was, quite obviously, a president of the student council, but they weren't scheduled to meet today. She should have said she was there to pick up a book she'd left behind, or something.

Shimako nervously wondered if she should change her answer, but there didn't seem to be any follow-up questions.

"I see. Good luck."

She wasn't asked to show her student identification card, probably because she was wearing her school uniform.

Shimako bowed, then walked down the ginkgo tree lined path.

(So that's ...)

She realized something. Even though it was Sunday, it looked like a number of clubs had activities today.

Shimako glanced back over her shoulder. Ami-san was just passing the security guard.

Maybe she'd known about this already. Since it was the weekend, access to the grounds would usually be restricted. But Ami-san was so watchful, perhaps she'd investigated which clubs would be holding practices ahead of time.

The main entrance to the school building was open too. Shimako went to the second-years' shoe-box area, opened her locker, and changed into her indoor shoes.

Suddenly remembering what Noriko had done, Shimako then walked over to the first-years' shoe-box section.

The name "Nijou" was written in methodical lettering on one of the first-year camellia group lockers. Surrounded on all sides by lockers adorned with stickers, colorful nametag paper, and other decorations favored by girls, Noriko's plain locker stood out like a sore thumb.

(Hehehe.)

Shimako smiled to herself. Last year, her own locker had been equally bare. Even Yumi-san, who usually didn't bother about that kind of thing, had had a small sticker on hers.

Decorating one's locker was a characteristic peculiar to first-year students. Most students didn't bother by the time they reached second-year. It just caused heartache when, at the end of the third semester, they were told that they had to return them to their original form.

Even though the stickers were the easy-to-peel type, after being attached for a whole year they were stuck on quite stubbornly. Those who got carried away and drew beyond the borders of their nametag had to use all kinds of cleaning agents to erase the pen marks. Shimako remembered the sight of her classmates frantically scrubbing away with washcloths.

Whether they didn't want to repeat that a second time, or they simply thought such behavior was too childish now that they were a year older, the

second and third-year's shoe boxes were largely untouched. – Quite strange, that.

As she started heading towards the Rose Mansion, Shimako found herself standing in front of the lockers for the first-year peach group.

Like Noriko the previous week, she looked for the locker with 'Igawa' written on it. Soon enough she found it, and like the others around it, it had a number of stickers on it.

" – Oh."

Shimako instinctively brought her hand up to her mouth. The locker had five stickers on it, all of them white roses.

Shimako wanted to run away, since it felt like she was snooping around inside Ami-san's mind. Ami-san would arrive soon. She had to get away quick.

Just as she was about to go, her eyes fell on the locker immediately below.

"Huh?"

For a moment, she thought that Ami-san had two lockers. Why? Because that locker was decorated exactly the same, with five white rose stickers.

(Emori ...)

She ran her finger along the nametag. It looked like they were quite good friends, since they'd be seated next to each other too.

(I wonder if these are popular with this class.)

Shimako was deep in thought as she walked. If Ami-san were the only person to have the stickers, then perhaps that meant she attached some deeper significance to them, but since others had them then they were probably less meaningful. It may just have been a case of someone getting hold of a bunch of white rose stickers and sharing them with her friends. As she considered this, Shimako started to relax.

She entered the Rose Mansion and plugged the electric kettle into the wall. Looking at the clock, it was almost midday.

"It'll be lunchtime soon ... "

Thinking this, Shimako put the food she'd bought into the refrigerator. Cheesecake, marinated fish and vegetables. They would all be just as good cold.

Shimako thought she should prepare tea while waiting, but unfortunately she didn't know Ami-san's preference.

(I wonder if I should go and meet her.)

While it was unthinkable that she wouldn't know where the Rose Mansion was, Shimako had seen plenty of students falter at the doorway, unable to take that step inside. Since students with club activities were unlikely to be lingering nearby, Ami-san probably wouldn't be worried about being seen with her either.

Ami-san wasn't anywhere in sight of the front door. Shimako entered the school building and looked down the long corridor.

However, there was no-one in the direction of the shoe-boxes.

(What happened to her ... ?)

Perhaps they'd strayed too far apart in an effort not to be seen together. She had confirmed that Ami-san made it past the entrance, so she should undoubtedly be on her way to the Rose Mansion.

Shimako started to walk down the corridor. Unknowingly, she hastened her pace.

It would be best if nothing had happened. It wasn't helpful to obsess about what may have happened. Since the school was largely deserted, Ami-san might not be found if she was in distress, particularly if she was crouched down.

As she was walking past the toilet block, Shimako heard voices coming from inside.

At first she dismissed them, since Ami-san was by herself, but after she'd walked past she reconsidered and turned back. Ami-san had been by herself, but it was entirely possible that she'd run into someone at school. In

that case, it was obvious why she wasn't at the Rose Mansion. She was deep in conversation with the classmate she'd accidentally met.

Shimako wasn't intending to eavesdrop. She simply wanted to ascertain whether or not one of those voices belonged to Ami-san, so strained to hear them.

"Like I said ... "

" ... from here ... "

"I can't."

" ... come on ... "

She could only hear fragments of the conversation. But it definitely sounded as though one of those was Ami-san's voice. Consequently, Shimako walked back down the corridor. Thinking that she would wait in the Rose Mansion until Ami-san had finished her conversation.

Just as she was about to leave the school building and enter the courtyard, Shimako heard the sound of a door being flung open, and instinctively turned around. What she saw surprised her – the girl that came out first was grabbed around the wrist by the girl who came out second, who then attempted to drag her back into the toilet block.

The one being grabbed was Ami-san, the one doing the grabbing was the classmate that Ami-san had shared that burst of laughter with the other day.

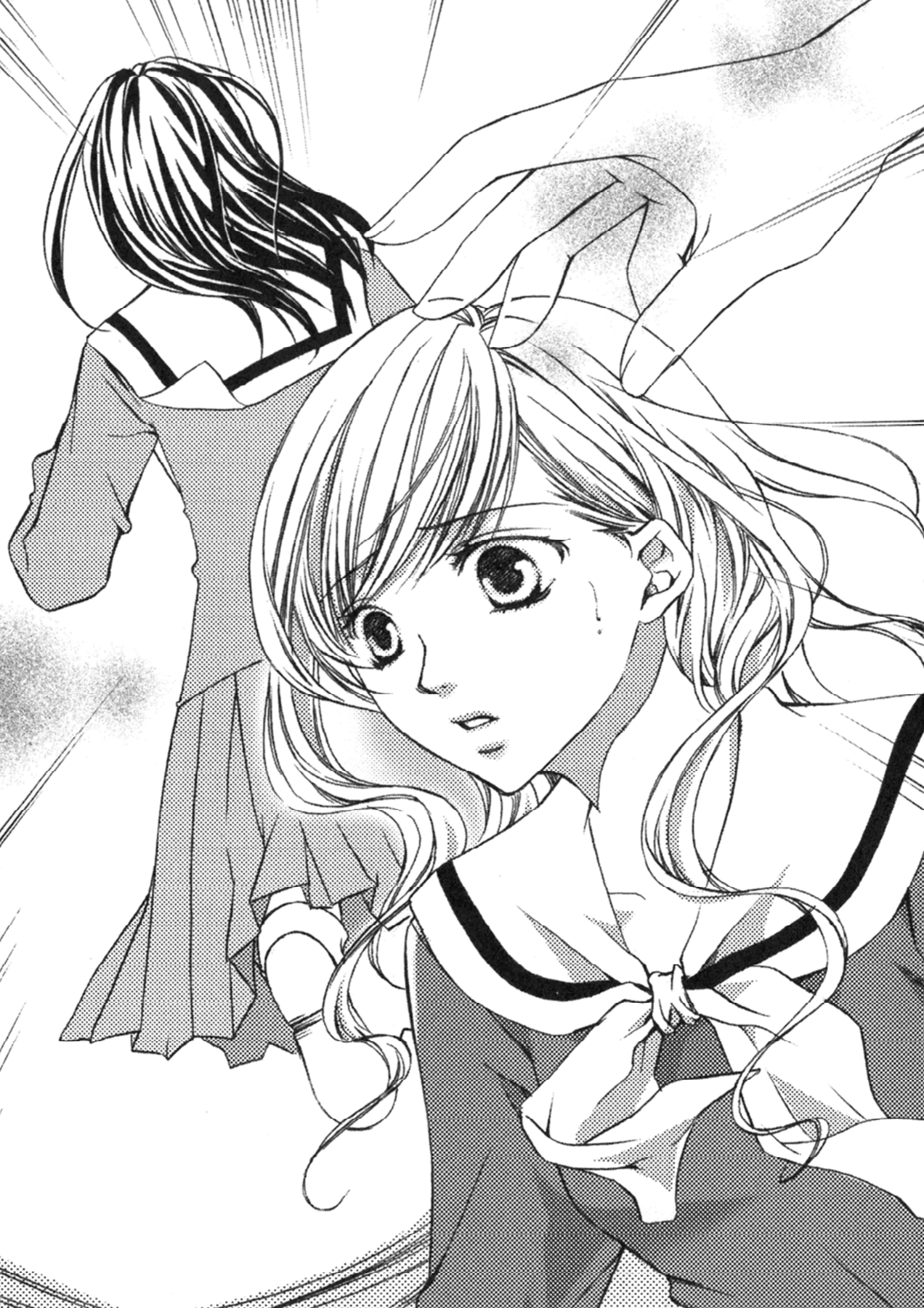
"Ami-san ... "

When Shimako called out, the two girls turned towards her simultaneously. On seeing Shimako, Ami-san's classmate hurriedly dropped her arm.

"Ah ... I ... "

As the girl struggled for something to say, she nervously stepped backwards. Still unable to find the words she was looking for, Ami-san's classmate turned tail and fled.

"A – "



Ami-san reached out her now free hand and called out to stop the other girl, but then gave up and lowered her arm, perhaps realizing it was too late to chase after her now.

"Are you alright?"

Shimako didn't understand what had just happened. So she walked over to Ami-san, who had been left in the hallway outside the toilet block.

"I'm sorry I caused you trouble. We were just playing around."

However, as she was speaking, Ami-san's wrist was turning red. Additionally, one of her shoes had come off and fallen beside the door. Probably from a scuffle that they'd had inside the toilet block.

"Wait."

Shimako picked up the shoe and placed it in front of Ami-san. Then she whispered.

"Why ... ?"

"I told you, we were just playing around."

After bowing slightly, Ami-san put her shoe back on. She spoke the same words as before, as though they were a charm.

We were just playing around.

However, that's not what it had looked like at all. They weren't laughing like they had been when Shimako saw them in the courtyard the previous week.

"I did something wrong to her."

When Shimako heard those despondent words, for some reason she felt as though she were the one who had done something wrong.

Part 2.

"You really have no idea what people find insulting, do you?"

Yoshino grumbled, their lunch spread out in front of them in the park.

"Huh?"

Chisato-san asked, as she wiped the tears away from her eyes. On the lake, a couple were riding in a boat. With that kind of backdrop, sitting together at a bench, Chisato-san just had to crack up at the lunch that she'd brought along, didn't she.

"Exactly my point. I shouldn't have to tell you that it's rude to laugh like that when you see someone's lunch."

"Ah, you're right. It was rude. However."

Having momentarily composed herself, Chisato-san broke into laughter again, like the aftershocks of an earthquake.

"It really is completely different to Rei-sama."

It was hopeless. This girl obviously didn't know the meaning of the word 'introspection.'

"Could you not compare it to Rei-chan's cooking?"

"Ah, you're right. I'm sorry. Rei-sama's fried food was crispy on the outside and tender on the inside, like a professional's. Obviously, it'd be wrong to compare you to a pro."

"Hmmpf."

Even though she said that, Chisato-san was probably thinking that it was pretty laughable when compared to an amateur's too. Yoshino herself was well aware of that. The exterior was black and the inside was half-cooked, so rather than looking like something deep fried it more closely resembled a botamochi completely covered in sesame seeds. Incidentally, her wieners weren't too badly burnt, but the ones that were supposed to resemble crabs looked more like sooty bamboo mats, while the ones that were supposed to resemble octopuses looked more like silver-grass with

heads. And as for the fried egg – well, better not to say anything more about that.

When Chisato-san first said that they'd bring their lunch, Yoshino naturally assumed her mother would make it for her, but then she'd added, "Of course, you have to make it yourself," and so, reluctantly, Yoshino had picked up the frying pan. Rei-chan would usually prepare lunch for them whenever they had picnics like this, so it wasn't something Yoshino had had to do before. It's never going to end well when you're suddenly asked to perform at something that you don't do normally. That's the kind of thing that's obvious without needing to test it.

"Well, even if the meat is rare, it doesn't look like there's anything that would be inedible."

Apparently all that laughing had made her hungry. Chisato-san wolfed down one of the brown 'silver-grass' pieces, and some of the fried egg that looked like a scrambled egg with another egg poured on top of it and then frozen.

And in exchange.

"Have some of mine."

Chisato-san's lunch was lovely. She had norimaki with various fillings (salmon, cucumber, and fried egg), and they looked like a colorful flower bed when they were all lined up. She also had bell pepper, octopus, and broccoli pieces that had been coated in batter and lightly fried, and given the different ingredients and requirements in cooking time this obviously would have been quite a handful.

Sadly, Yoshino couldn't stop herself from a spot of light teasing.

"A while back, I heard on TV that the color red is supposed to increase your appetite. But after seeing that movie, the red bell peppers are just reminding me of all that blood."

"Sop it."

Having just put one of the bell pepper pieces into her mouth, Chisato-san's voice came out sounding rather strange. She probably meant to say, "Stop it."

"Just don't think about it. That eerie, gloomy shrine in the estate, and the drip-drip-drip onto the Buddha statue ... Eeeek"

"Eeeek."

Even though she brought up the subject, Yoshino still squealed when she remembered the scene from "The Tale of the Blood-stained Mansion" that they'd just seen. Was this sadism, or masochism? The couple on the boat looked at them in surprise.

"You put on a brave face, pretending you weren't scared. But I knew you were frightened, Yoshino-san."

Chisato-san chortled.

"You can talk. The movie had barely started and you were shaking in your seat, grabbing hold of my arm tightly."

Yoshino shot back.

"I'm fairly sure you grabbed on to me first."

"No, that was you. First to grab, and first to scream."

"That wasn't a scream, it was a laugh!"

In the end, although they had sat through the horror film, they hadn't been able to quietly endure it and had clutched each other by the arms and screamed over and over again. Since neither of them were enjoying it, they would have been better off leaving – but the first one to make such a proposal would have been branded a coward, so neither of them wanted to say anything. It would also have been a waste of the ticket money too, but that wasn't the main reason. And so, they watched to the end. All the way to the ending credits.

Right, right. The five seconds after the final, "The End," were the most frightening of all. As they watched the couple they'd seen earlier running to the movie theater, and had been sitting a short distance away, get up and

leave as soon as the ending credit music started. Geeze, whether they were coming or going, they were always in such a hurry.

"I can't remember when,"

While chewing on one of the norimaki, Yoshino questioned Chisato-san.

"But didn't you say you weren't any good at cooking, or something?"

The saltiness of the salmon came through nicely. It wasn't obvious at first glance, but there were sesame seeds mixed in with the white rice.

"Yeah. But seeing Rei-sama's lunch last year really kindled my interest in it. I've spent the last year training myself because I wanted to be like that, and it's at least looking good, don't you think?"

"Mmm."

It must have been a lot of work. Speaking of which, Chisato-san's image had changed a lot in the past year. She'd cut her hair, joined the kendo club, and apparently started cooking ... perhaps she'd changed even more in other ways that Yoshino didn't know about. As annoying as it was, she'd become a much better woman than before.

"So, you know, my earlier laughter wasn't because I was making fun of your lunch."

One of Yoshino's malformed onigiri disappeared into Chisato-san's mouth.

"Then what?"

"I saw myself from a year ago in that, and it took me back."

"..."

Sneaky. Was she trying to make a favorable impression by saying that kind of thing?

To Yoshino, "Tanuma Chisato" had to be someone she disliked. She'd sought out Rei-chan's love, she found Rei-chan's card, she went on a date with Rei-chan, and she made sure she was seen arm-in-arm with Rei-chan by Yoshino –

"Hey,"

Yoshino inquired.

"Why are we following the same route that you took last year on your date with Rei-chan?"

To which Chisato-san responded by mumbling to herself, "Why indeed?" as she sipped tea from the cap of her thermos.

Part 3.

"Here you go."

Steam rose from the liquid that had been poured into the flask lid.

"Thanks ... This is?"

"Oolong tea. I brought it from home."

Touko-chan said, deftly raising the long, slender flask. It had apparently been in her handbag all along, but Yumi hadn't realized until just now.

They were seated on a bench on the train platform. Waiting for the next train to arrive. It was impeccable timing, as Yumi was just starting to feel thirsty.

"Thanks."

After blowing on the tea to cool it, Yumi drank the tea and returned the makeshift cup to Touko-chan. Then Touko-chan poured herself some and drank it.

From M station they'd taken the bus to a private railway station. Then they'd caught a train to this station. It looked like they had to transfer to another train to reach their ultimate destination. Touko-chan may have chosen this circuitous route because it was the least expensive. They probably would have been able to get there quicker using JR trains, but that would have taken them over their 4000 yen budget.

(Huh? The budget?)

Yumi was taken aback, and stood up.

"I didn't bring any lunch with me."

"Neither did I."

Touko-chan said, unconcerned, as she sipped her tea.

"Ah, right."

So, sit down. Since she'd gone to the trouble of preparing tea, Yumi has assumed she'd also brought lunch.

"It's here."

Touko-chan said, closing the flask lid. The train could be seen decelerating in to the station.

Yumi didn't know whether it was because it was Sunday, or whether it was always like this, but the train was fairly crowded. She caught glimpses of people with backpacks, and people wearing mountain-climbing boots. There must be somewhere along this train's route that would make an enjoyable hiking or mountain-climbing day-trip.

There weren't two seats free next to each other, so they stood by the door. The train slowly started to move.

While the train stations themselves were more or less the same, as the number of stations they passed grew, so did the number of fields, or woods, or mountains between them. It really brought home the sensation that they were gradually moving further and further away from Tokyo.

"When I said I would take over the hospital, my grandfather was overjoyed."

Touko-chan said, out of the blue. Yumi had been gazing at the scenery, and the surprise made her turn from the glass window to look at Touko-chan.

"Although this is a fairly old story."

"That's okay."

Yumi nodded. She wanted to hear Touko-chan's story.

On the bus, and on the trains up until now, Touko-chan hadn't said a word. Well, of course she'd made the minimal conversation necessary to purchase tickets. But when Yumi had turned to her and tried to start a conversation to stave off boredom, Touko-chan would politely listen, and when asked a direct question would only responded with a 'yes' or 'no,' so the conversation didn't advance.

Yumi had been wondering what Touko-chan was thinking about.

Which was why she'd decided to wait quietly. She believed that Touko-chan would put those thoughts into words in due course.

"The hospital, it's your grandfather's, right?"

She'd heard that Touko-chan's paternal grandfather ran a small hospital in the foothills of a mountain in one of Tokyo's surrounding prefectures. From memory, it was the hospital that Sachiko-sama's deceased grandmother had been admitted to the previous year.

"Yeah."

After nodding, Touko-chan turned away, gazing at the scenery outside. Above the grove of trees, the crows stretched their wings.

"My father didn't become a doctor. He was an only child too."

The 'too' was probably because Touko-chan herself was also an only child.

"It's only a small hospital, but the people of the surrounding area, and the patients that come from far away, all adore it. So it would be a shame for it to shut down when my grandfather eventually retires due to old age."

"And so ... "

"I thought I could become a doctor, or, if necessary, marry a doctor, and started making plans."

"_"

Despite her youth, she'd already planned out her future. Yumi stood in admiration. Even though she was a year older, Yumi hadn't yet contemplated a future career, or even what she'd do after graduation. Well, perhaps she was taking things a bit too lightly.

"But, just thinking about it showed how impossible it was."

Putting her forehead to the glass window, Touko-chan let out a sigh.

"Huh?"

"There was an insurmountable obstacle."

At that point, Yumi remembered the conversation she'd had with Touko-chan about the blank map. While the map was still blank, it held open the promise of all possibilities, but once she started drawing she realized it hadn't turned out the way she expected it to. This felt like the same kind of conversation. Despair for her future – although it may be too strong a comparison, it was that kind of feeling.

"My grandfather intends to retire in three years' time."

"Three years ... "

Yumi furrowed her brow.

"So what will happen to the hospital?"

"At the moment, there's a married couple in their 40s who are both doctors and assist my grandfather – the hospital will be entrusted to them. Neither my grandfather nor my parents thought I was being serious when I told them that I'd take over the hospital."

She had said that it was a fairly old story. In that case, it might have been when Touko-chan was in elementary school, or perhaps even younger. Adults, in general, would be pleased to hear a young child talking about her future. And on the off chance that they did remember it, they'd probably just consider it a happy memory.

However, it wasn't just an inconsequential memory to Touko-chan.

"In three years' time, I'll have graduated high-school, but even if I'm enrolled in a medical degree at some university, that's a long way off having a medical license. So then I considered marriage, but to get married at that age I'd still require parental consent."

"And your parents?"

As Yumi asked this, she felt a bead of sweat roll down her forehead. Why was Touko-chan being so stubborn about this?

"I asked them. Of course, they said no. If it was because I loved someone and wanted to be with them, then that was one thing, but getting married for the sake of the hospital was foolish, they said."

"Sounds about right."

It seemed like an extremely sensible position. Whereas Touko-chan's was far more out there. However, taking over the hospital seemed to be that important to her. As though it was the meaning of her existence.

"It felt like there was no need for me anymore. That since they'd found a replacement for me, my usefulness had ended."

"Huh?"

"So I ran away from home."

"That was the day ... "

Yumi mumbled, remembering, and Touko-chan nodded.

"That's right."

Touko-chan's fight with her parents, and visit to the Fukuzawa residence after being brought there by Yumi's younger brother Yuuki, had taken place during the second semester exam break. After eating dinner with them, Touko-chan's cousin Kashiwagi-san came by to pick her up and she went surprisingly quietly. Even so, Yumi had heard that Touko-chan's mother had received such a shock when her daughter ran away from home that she was bedridden for a short while.

She hadn't heard why Touko-chan ran away from home.

Kashiwagi-san had offered to tell her, but she hadn't asked. Based on the conversation with Shimako-san, Yumi had vaguely suspected that she may have been worrying about whether to follow her father's occupation or not, and it looked like the real reason was somewhat similar to that.

However.

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure I understand."

If Touko-chan wanted to be a doctor, then she would have to study. It was easy to see that a result of that might be succeeding her grandfather at his hospital, however, she seemed to be stubbornly tormenting herself with the idea that she absolutely had to take over the hospital no matter what.

"Oh, you don't?"

Touko-chan smiled slightly. It looked like that may have been the reaction she was aiming for all along.

The train stopped at a station. Touko-chan still wasn't showing any sign of getting off the train. She hadn't checked the station name either, so it looked like she knew where she was going based on the landscape outside, or something.

The pair moved away from the doorway, making room for people to get on and off. Seven people exited through the doors and two got on. After a little while, the doors closed and the train once more started moving.

Gradually it picked up pace before settling in to a steady rhythm. Click-clack, click-clack, click-clack, click-clack, ...

"I mean, there's people lined up to take over the hospital, right?"

Yumi resumed their interrupted conversation. Touko-chan's grandfather's retirement wasn't going to cause the immediate closure of the hospital. She should have welcomed the news that she didn't have to take over straight away.

Listening to Touko-chan's story, Yumi didn't think there was anything she could do. Naturally, she didn't have any sage advice to offer.

However, Yumi thought it would be fine if she just listened, and conveyed her own thoughts. She was led to this conclusion because Touko-chan had chosen her to tell this to.

"Ah ... although if they're going to abuse the patients, or bulldoze the hospital to put up apartments once they're put in charge then that's another story."

Yumi mumbled, and Touko-chan clearly refuted this.

"They're wonderful people."

Touko-chan said they were currently assisting her grandfather not only with patient care, but also with the hospital administration. They'd apparently both been patients at the hospital when they were children, so considered their work a way of repaying that debt of gratitude.

"So, it should be fine to let them take over the hospital for now, right? You could revisit this later on if you become a doctor, or if you marry a doctor."

"But."

"Even if you don't take over the hospital, no-one's going to think less of you. After all, your father didn't take over the hospital, and no-one thinks less of him, right?"

"My father and I are very different. For me, being the heir to the house of Matsudaira became the foundation of my existence."

Again with this. Her stubborn side was showing on her face.

"Why?"

Touko-chan couldn't answer this question. Or rather, she went silent instead of answering.

Even though Yumi had thought she was getting closer to Touko-chan, it looked like they were still some distance apart.

No, that's not right, Yumi thought.

The door she leaned against swayed in time with the click-clack of the tracks. Outside the window, the landscape rolled past. The as-yet-unseen mountains, the trees and the sky all urged them onwards.

Even though they were both silent, it didn't feel like they were a long way apart. They were simply taking a short break, exhausted from the conversation.

She was, undoubtedly, drawing closer to Touko-chan.

Yumi felt that change within herself, much like how they were drawing closer to their destination.

Click-clack, click-clack.

Waiting at their journey's destination was, undoubtedly, Touko-chan's true self.

Amendment, Overwriting and an Old Photograph

Part 1.

The electric kettle had brought the water to boil.

"Do you want black tea? Coffee? Japanese tea?"

Shimako asked the girl seated at the table. The girl look depressed.

"Uh."

That was such a non-answer, it was as though the girl hadn't noticed the question. Reluctantly, Shimako spoke.

"Right, right, we're having onigiri for lunch. We should have Japanese tea, after all."

She poured some of the hot water into the teacups to warm them. Then she added tea leaves to the small teapot and poured in the hot water.

Lined up on the table on the second floor of the Rose Mansion was the food they'd bought in the basement of the department store, all except for the cake.

As she prepared the tea, she looked over them. Six onigiri, six pieces of fried chicken, 300 grams of marinated fish and vegetables ... all the portions seemed a little too large.

Surely there was no particular significance to this. However, there was often quite an important reason hidden behind seemingly insignificant actions. In other words, she shouldn't overlook these signs.

"Uh."

Once more, the response came quite late. Apparently she agreed with the decision to have Japanese tea.

She hadn't been particularly courteous from the start, but this was taking it to a whole new level. After the fight (although Shimako wasn't sure if it was right to call it that) with her classmate outside the toilet block, the wind seemed to have been knocked out of her sails.

"Hey,"

After pouring the tea, Shimako asked.

"That girl from before, she's your classmate, right? When was it ... right, the first time I went to your first-year peach group classroom, she was the one who went and brought you to me, wasn't she?"

"That's probably right."

"It is right. Otherwise, there wouldn't have been consistency."

"Huh?"

The eyes of Ami-san swum with surprise. Then she looked towards Shimako-san's hands, pointed, and said, "Ah."

"There's three teacups."

"Yes."

Shimako nodded.

"Invite your friend, and the three of us will have lunch together."

When Shimako said this, she was highly pleased with the hitherto unseen look of pleasant surprise that floated across the girl's face. So she could make that sort of expression to, huh.

"I wonder if you could ask her to come here."

"Me?"

"Yes. This time around, I'd like you to bring Igawa Ami-san to me."

Shimako smiled.

That's right. You don't have to keep this charade up.

It wasn't yet too late. Things could still be properly amended.

Part 2.

Yoshino thought that Chisato-san might be out for revenge.

A year ago, when she unexpectedly won the date with her 'beloved Rei-sama,' she'd been flying high, only to have Rei-chan's failure deal irreparable damage to her.

(So much so that she came to me with her troubles.)

At that time, even if it had been a mistake, Yoshino felt compassion for Chisato-san, and they both cried together. Even just thinking about it made Yoshino tear up a little.

But calling it revenge might not be the best idea. Removing the aggressive connotations of revenge and calling it overwriting might be better. Taking the places from those unpleasant memories and repainting them with pleasant memories. That was incredibly good. Yoshino found herself instinctively wanting to raise her hand in approval.

And so, she immediately made a proposal.

"Hey, hey, hey, can we go to the zoo too?"

"What?"

That's not in the plan, Chisato-san scowled. However, Yoshino was not deterred.

"It's unfair that we're only going to the places you remember."

"Unfair?"

"On that day one year ago, I went and looked at the elephant, and the deer, and the rabbits all by myself."

" ... I see."

Chisato-san said admiringly, apparently understanding Yoshino's intentions. However, as they approached the zoo entrance her face grew dark.

"The entrance fee's 400 yen."

"We should have that much left. We were going to get coffee somewhere, right?"

In this case, they could drop the coffee. They still had some tea remaining in their thermos.

"We have 1000 yen, so we can go in. But if we do, there's not enough for your bus fare home, Yoshino-san."

"Huh?"

"The plan was originally to go to a cafe, but we had to change that to 300 yen coffees from a basic coffee shop so there'd be enough for your bus fare."

"No way."

Yoshino opened her left palm and traced out some figures with her finger as she calculated. People who used an abacus would probably flip imaginary beads in the air at times like this, but that would be overdoing it. The movie ticket and the zoo entrance fee, times two, take that from 4000 yen, and if there's enough left over for the bus fare ...

"Ah. Ahhh."

10 yen short.

"Well it's a good thing I rode my bike here then."

"Ooooh."

It was too late to cry about it now. Besides, there was one thing she didn't want to tell Chisato-san. She left home late because she'd been making her lunch.

"What are you going to do?"

Are you coming in, or not, Yoshino asked.

"Let's go."

It's too late to turn back now. They had to push on, one way or the other.

"A true Tokyoite spends all their money the day they earn it."

"You know, I think you're using that phrase incorrectly."

Chisato-san laughed as she handed over the 1000 yen note to pay for the entrance fee.

Part 3.

They had just exited the train station.

Out through the ticket gate to the front of the building. Most of the people that got off the train with them were briskly walking towards the bus station, or the taxi stand, or else heading over to a different railway line's train station.

However, Touko-chan was not moving. She looked at her watch, and made an action that was like a quick nod. She must be waiting for something.

Yumi too waited quietly.

Where are we going, what are we waiting for? Those questions, and more, she didn't ask as she stood by Touko-chan's side.

On closer inspection, there were a number of other people that, like them, were waiting around and not going anywhere. A car showed up not long later, probably driven by a family member, and one of them got in.

(Huh?)

Carried along by the wind from some unknown source, a sweet scent made its way to Yumi's nose.

(It's not perfume.)

It was the faint, spontaneous scent of flowers. Looking around, she spotted a lady in her twenties holding a flower basket in her hands.

Pink roses and daisies. And she could see something green, with small white flowers – probably baby's-breath. Yumi was marveling at how pretty it was when Touko-chan tugged on her sleeve.

"Yumi-sama. It's here."

"Huh?"

Yumi turned back around to see what 'was here' in time to see a small whitish bus pull into the roundabout in front of the train station.

"That (is what we're going on)?"

"Yes."

The bus pulled up and opened its door, and a few of the people remaining at the station had apparently been waiting for it as they got on board. The lady with the flower basket was among them. The words, "Matsudaira Mountain Base Hospital" were written in green letters along the side of the bus.

(Ahh, so that's it.)

As Yumi followed Touko-chan onto the bus, she finally realized what their destination was. The driver was apparently an acquaintance of Touko-chan's, as he greeted her with, "It's been a while." The 'Matsudaira Mountain Base Hospital' was obviously her grandfather's hospital.

"All those heading to the Matsudaira Mountain Base Hospital, please come aboard."

The bus driver temporarily vacated his seat, went outside and called this out in the direction of the train station building a couple of times, before returning to his seat and starting the bus once more.

Inside the bus were seven people, not counting Yumi and Touko-chan. As well as the young lady with the flower basket, there was also an elderly gentleman carrying flowers, and an elderly lady carrying something large wrapped in a furoshiki cloth. Since it was Sunday, they were probably visiting patients at the hospital.

"This bus – "

Touko-chan anticipated Yumi's question, and answered it before she finished.

"It's a courtesy bus. The hospital's a fair distance from the train station."

Then, as though just realizing it, she added, "Of course, it's complementary." Touko-chan had apparently seen through Yumi's attempt to conceal her concern about their dwindling war-chest, that is, the remains of the 4000 yen contained in an envelope. They'd spent close to 1700 yen so far. Since they'd need the same amount to get back, that left just 600 yen for two people.

With 300 yen each, they could probably buy some bread from a convenience store, but the courtesy bus was taking them away from the train station, so would there be convenience stores near their destination? Maybe they should have bought something to take with them at the train station.

(Ahh, what am I doing?)

Was it really an appropriate time to be worrying about lunch? Touko-chan was finally letting Yumi in to her territory.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yeah. Ah, no."

A flustered Yumi thought, "She's seen through me once again," and because she was unprepared, it soon showed on her face. Touko-chan laughed.

"I'm hungry. But if you could just wait a little bit longer, please."

Yumi looked at her watch and thought, "Well, it is about that time."

The bus gradually drew away from the urban areas, until it was driving down country roads. It wasn't even close to snowing, but the scenery Yumi saw out the bus window definitely felt colder than Tokyo, probably due to the proximity of the mountain.

They'd probably been in the bus for about ten minutes when Touko-chan took a single photograph out from where it was stored amongst the pages of a paperback book and showed it to Yumi.

The photo was in color, but it was easy to tell that it was a fairly old photograph nonetheless. Five girls in Lillian's Girls Academy high-school uniforms were lined up, smiling at the camera. The same happy group photograph taken throughout the ages.

"My mother's in this photo."

"Is this her?"

Yumi pointed, without thinking about it. She was the spitting image of Touko-chan, a serious looking girl with vertical hair rolls on each side of her face.

" ... Yeah."

Touko-chan quietly smiled, apparently quite satisfied.

"You're right. That's my mother."

She said.

The Door That Opened

Part 1.

In front of the elephant enclosure, they ran into some quite unexpected people.

"Mami-san?"

"Err, ah, Yoshino-san!"

Both groups were taken aback. Mami-san and her petit soeur Hidemi-san were eating ice-creams. Wasn't it a bit cold for that?

Yoshino folded her arms and started the interrogation.

"I suppose it would be a bit boorish to ask why you're here."

Mami-san was the chief editor of the "Lillian Kwaraban" → She knew that today was the day of the Valentine's Day dates → She came to gather information about the dates.

There could be no other reason for two newspaper club members to be loitering around this area today. However.

"No, listen, listen."

Mami-san and Hidemi-san frantically waved their left arms, which weren't holding ice-cream.

"We're just having our own date."

"Huh?"

"It has nothing to do with a newspaper article. Really."

"Oh?"

"At first, I did think about straining myself to follow you, like my onee-sama last year. But while I was thinking about it, it seemed kind of pointless. Because today, somewhere, somehow, the three winners of the treasure hunt would surely be having a wonderful time."

Hearing this, Yoshino and Chisato-san looked at each other. They answered neither, "Yeah," nor, "No way," instead smiling vaguely.

"And yet, we'd be chasing after them like idiots? On Sunday, of all days? We're not detectives, but we're going to follow them and keep tabs on what they do? And not even get paid for it?"

Mami-san was getting herself down just thinking about it. Apparently this was still a fairly raw topic.

"But my onee-sama wasn't about to give up just like that."

Hidemi-san blurted out excitedly from beside her.

"She said, 'If we're going to write an article about a date, we'll write a report about our own date.'"

"Hah."

Not really understanding, but just saying something to be polite. This time around Mami-san explained.

"So, basically, a personal account along the lines of, 'What can you do for 4000 yen?' Something that our readers can compare to the three dates of the prize winners. Of course, we've covered all the expenses ourselves."

Truthfully, it wasn't just Mami-san and Hidemi-san, there were a lot of soeurs at school that were like that.

"There's two patterns."

Mami-san held up two fingers, making the peace sign.

The first was trying to guess where the future Roses were going on their dates, which had been last week, the other was resolving to go on a date that Sunday. If the details of the date weren't published, most people would probably go with last year's budget of 3000 yen.

Following that thought, once the Valentine's Day special edition of the Lillian Kwaraban was published, there would be a number of girls looking to follow the same route as the future Roses. Next Sunday, a plague of Lillian's Girls Academy students would probably descend upon three areas around Tokyo.

"And with that, I bid you farewell, so we don't intrude upon each other."

The two newspaper club members waved cheerfully, then headed off towards the monkey enclosure.

"Oh my. I guess they really are just out on a date."

The two that had been left behind saw them off with the expressions of those who had just been tricked by a fox.

Sorry to say, but the fox enclosure was in the opposite direction.

Part 2.

"When did you realize?"

The teenaged girl that, until recently, Shimako had been calling 'Ami-san' asked timidly. Sitting beside her was another teenaged girl, who was also slumped over and looking downcast.

"Something felt off from the start. But it was only recently that I became convinced."

"Only recently?"

Shimako nodded, "Yes."

"In front of the toilet block, it seemed like you two were arguing about something, remember? I picked up the fallen shoe, and saw the name that was written on the inside sole."

Although somewhat blurred, the name 'Emori' was clearly visible written in permanent marker.

"Ahh ... "

One or the other, no, probably both of the girls in front of her said in comprehension.

"It would indeed be strange for Igawa-san to be wearing Emori-san's shoes. But, rather than the fight being over someone mistakenly putting on someone else's shoes, it seemed more reasonable to me that it was Emori-san wearing her own shoes. Which led me to reconsider everything that had happened up until that point."

Upon reflection, the foundation of Shimako's belief that the girl she called 'Ami-san' was actually Igawa Ami was because that was the girl that had been brought to her when she initially called on the first-year peach class, and because that girl had presented Igawa Ami's student diary – and that was all.

For instance, if there was someone standing in for Igawa Ami, and she gave that girl her student diary – basically, if they were accomplices – then it would be easy for them to trade places.

In that case, 'Ami-san' would seek to avoid public attention at all costs. If someone called out her real name, then she'd be found out immediately. Even if that didn't happen, if the rumor spread that 'Ami-san' was the winner, then the switch would be over. Lots of people would know that 'Ami-san' wasn't Igawa Ami-san.

"Therefore, you are Emori-san."

Shimako looked first at 'Ami-san.' Immediately following that, she turned to 'Ami-san's classmate.'

"And you are Igawa Ami-san, right?"

They both nodded, with a sense of resignation.

"It's no wonder Noriko thought Igawa Ami-san seemed different to the image I presented."

It was only natural, since they were looking at two different people.

So then, why had Emori-san pretended to be Ami-san? That was what Shimako didn't understand. She had wanted to bring them both together here to find that out.

"So, could you tell me why?"

Shimako asked, and the real Igawa Ami-san started speaking, haltingly.

"Chi ... Emori-san and I sit next to each other in class, and have been good friends ever since we started school here. Out of all the Roses, we both like you, Rosa Gigantea, the best, and we bought matching white rose pencil cases, and we've both grown our hair long like yours, and we do everything together."

As she listened, Shimako thought back to the white rose stickers she saw on their lockers.

"Plus, our voices sound similar enough, so we'll sometimes answer each others' name during roll call for a bit of a joke, and we occasionally swap lunches. I guess the boundary between us sort of blurs when we're at school."

"But on Valentine's Day, unusually, we took different approaches."

At this point, the previous 'Ami-san', ie. Emori-san, took over telling the story.

"Ami-san entered the absentee's chance draw, while I took part in the treasure hunt. Of course, we were both going after the white card."

And, as everyone knew, the white card was not found on the day, so it went to the absentee's chance draw.

"When I arrived at school the following day, Ami-san looked deathly pale. She said that the white card might fall to her. She'd heard about the white card's hiding spot that morning, and knew it was quite close to the place she had written."

The words she'd written on the absentee's entry form were, "Under a car in the staff parking lot." Using Mami-san's scoring system, it was a 90.

"What should I do?" she asked. I told her flat out that she should go on the date. However, Ami-san said she couldn't, that it would be impossible for her. She said she wouldn't even be able to talk to Rosa Gigantea alone, never mind go on a date with her."

Ami-san mumbled, "Because."

"It was always fun to imagine getting close to you, Rosa Gigantea, and talking with you, and even going on a date with you, but when it looked like that might become a reality, I didn't know what to do."

Shimako didn't consider herself that imposing a person, but perhaps she was hard to approach, even beyond her involvement in the Yamayurikai leadership.

"Then Igawa-san started panicking, saying she was going to turn it down. I thought that was stupid. I asked her, "Why, when you've got hold of something that we all were wishing for, are you letting it go so easily?" Then I said, "If you can't do it, then give it to me." It just slipped out."

Emori-san hung her head. She'd been regretting those words that 'just slipped out' ever since.

"I'd meant it as a joke. So I said, "I mean, if you're just going to give up, after all." But then Ami-san said, "Okay. We can just swap places like we always do." Even then, I wasn't serious. I thought Ami-san would change her

mind, given time. I still only half believed that she would actually win the white card. However, that afternoon."

"I paid a visit to your classroom."

Shimako remarked. That day, Shimako had paid a visit to the first-year peach group classroom to speak to "Igawa Ami-san."

"Right. Whether it was fate or luck, it was Ami-san herself who answered the door. And rather than identifying herself, she came over to see me. She said, "Remember our promise, you have to take my place," and then she slipped her student diary into my hands."

And so, Shimako had believed her completely. After all, there was no reason to expect something like that had happened.

"Numerous times I thought about coming clean to you. But then I'd think it would be such a waste, or that it was too late to say anything, or countless other competing thoughts. Although, if I'm being honest, maybe all I was thinking was that I wanted to go on a date with Rosa Gigantea."

Tears fell down Emori-san's face. Shimako hadn't meant to blame her. She'd just wanted to hear the truth.

"And then?"

Shimako stood up and opened a window. It felt like the atmosphere was growing stagnant. The weather was fine today, so the fresh air that ruffled the curtains as it entered wasn't cold.

"Did Ami-san choose the route for our date?"

Shimako-san turned around and asked them, and Ami-san responded with, "Yes."

"I read last year's report, and it sounded fun, so I told Emori-san I'd like the same thing. Even though it would actually be her going on the date. And if it was at the Rose Mansion, it'd be away from public notice, which worked out well for us."

So, even though they'd decided to go ahead with the swap, they'd planned it out together and it hadn't changed their friendship. Which explained why 'Ami-san' never answered immediately whenever Shimako

asked her a question about the date, instead responding with, "I'll think about it and get back to you tomorrow," or, "I'll go over this again at home," and taking the question as homework. It was because she'd decided to talk everything over with the real Ami-san.

"I always thought that it should be Ami-san going on the date. Even up to today, I was always willing to swap back if she changed her mind. I told her that if she apologized and explained what had happened, then Rosa Gigantea would forgive her. We met an hour before the date started and talked it over. But Ami-san was stubborn."

"Well, I mean, how could I face up to her after all this time? I'd deceived Rosa Gigantea. I'm a dishonest person. I'm unworthy of that right. If the real Igawa Ami is someone like me, then there's no way she could have a fun date."

Setting aside the deception, Shimako wondered if Ami-san really had to go as far as calling herself dishonest and unworthy. There's a large gap between running away because you're timid and being 'dishonest,' and, at the very least, as the person whose entry in the absentee's chance draw was closest to the answer, she most definitely did have that right.

Ami-san continued.

"So, in that case I should have bravely stood aside. But I was still overcome by this lingering affection. I watched you, from afar, as you went about your shopping, and let Emori-san persuade me into getting on the bus to school."

"And in the bathroom, you and Emori-san were quarreling about whether or not to go the Rose Mansion together, right?"

"That's right."

The truth had come out. Shimako said, "That's enough," and Ami-san responded with:

"But, there's something else, something I have to tell you, Rosa Gigantea."

"Is it about how you knew the hiding place of the white card beforehand?"

Shimako asked, and Ami-san's eyes flew open in shock.

"... How?"

Shimako returned to her seat, and looked directly at Ami-san.

"Well, about that. Even though you didn't get the Aota-sensei part, it was still an incredibly detailed answer. Plus it's the absentee's chance, right? You wouldn't have been able to put an entry in if you saw it being hidden on the day."

They'd talked about in on the day after the event, as they were sorting through the other entries. Not a single person who knew the location had leaked it, so it was a mystery how it got out. Mami-san had said to Shimako that she should ask the winner if she got the chance, but the chance hadn't arisen, so she hadn't asked until now.

"By chance, I spotted Rosa Gigantea and the three boutons in the car park. So I thought, hmm, just maybe."

"Ah, so it was that after all. You shouldn't have worried. That was our mistake, you didn't break any rules."

"Ohh, really?"

Ami-san's expression quickly brightened. Until then, she'd obviously been beset by guilt about putting in an entry when she already knew the answer.

"Could that be why you didn't participate?"

Emori-san prodded, as this was apparently the first she'd heard about Ami-san knowing the answer. In response, Ami-san stuck out her tongue.

"Yeah, it was. I felt guilty. But I thought, well, if no-one finds it on the day, then it's okay, right?"

"Huuh – no way – "

"It's true."

They both laughed together raucously. The same expression on their faces as Shimako had seen in the courtyard once before. The very expression that Shimako had hoped to see.

Ami-san to Ami-san, and –

"Emori-san, could you tell me your first name?"

Shimako asked. And, as she wiped away her tears of laughter, the former 'Ami-san' answered.

"Chiho. My name is Emori Chiho."

Chiho-san to Chiho-san, they'd both finally reverted back to normal, and that probably explained why.

"Well then, Ami-san, Chiho-san, I know it's a bit late, but why don't we have lunch?"

The 'carelessly purchased overly abundant food' was just right for three people.

There was still plenty of time left for their date.

It would be such a waste if they didn't have a great time.

Part 3.

The 300 yen per person lunch they had was surprisingly tasty.

Upon arriving at Touko-chan's grandfather's hospital, the first place she took Yumi was the cafeteria, so that they could fortify themselves with a meal.

It wasn't a restaurant as such, but if you made a reservation in advance you could get lunch for 300 yen or dinner for 500 yen. At any rate, there weren't any other shops nearby, so without it there would be nowhere for attendants or visitors to eat. Incidentally, today's lunch menu was a rice omelet, salad and a consomme soup.

"Ohh, Touko!"

While they were eating, a scruffy looking old man entered the cafeteria, walked over to Touko-chan and hugged her tightly.

"I heard you were coming, but I had to do my rounds. You're looking well. Why did you run away from home and cause mama and papa so much heartache? You little scoundrel."

He pinched Touko-chan's cheeks and smiled.

"You're always going on about that, grandpa. That was last year already, it's getting old."

"You're right, you're right."

The corners of his eyes drooped as he spoke. From Yumi's position, it was easy to tell he found Touko-chan so cute that he couldn't resist.

He was wearing a white doctor's robe, that looked like a long open-collared shirt, over the top of a turtleneck sweater. It would appear that this was the grandfather Yumi had heard so much about. The one that would retire in three more years. Although it looked like he was still working as a doctor currently, and quite lively too.

"Grandpa. This is a senior of mine from school, Fukuzawa Yumi-sama."

As they'd reached a break in their conversation, Touko-chan introduced Yumi to her grandfather.

"Yumi ... -san, are you, perhaps, Sachiko-san's?"

"You know of that?"

"Well of course I do, Saiko-san would often talk about you."

The Saiko-san he referred to would be Sachiko-sama's grandmother who had passed away the previous year. Sachiko-sama must have talked about Yumi when she came to visit, and Sachiko-sama's grandmother must have got the impression that Yumi was one of her friends.

"I see, you're Yumi-san. Please take good care of Touko. Make sure you work her hard."

"Umm, ... ahh, okay ... "

Work her hard? What was he going on about? Just as Yumi was getting flustered, Touko-chan stepped in.

"Don't worry about it. It's just a sports saying."

"Ah, right."

Apparently there was no deeper meaning to it. Yumi hadn't thought he meant that if Touko-chan became her petit soeur that she should start her on hard labor, but she had been a bit nervous.

"Will you be taking your time?"

Touko-chan's grandfather asked.

"I'll be going home after I've shown Yumi-sama around the area. After all, mama and papa will worry if I'm back late."

Touko-chan answered.

"Alright. Next time, you and mama and papa should all come together."

"And stay over night."

"Please do. I'll be waiting."

Leaving them with those words, Touko-chan's grandfather hurried out of the cafeteria. Apparently off to visit the patients, one by one.

Listening to their conversation, it seemed unthinkable that they'd have differing opinions on the fate of the hospital.

"In the end, I was small."

Touko-chan said, after they'd finished eating, as she picked up her tray. She also picked up Yumi's, so Yumi hurried after her.

"What do you mean?"

"Like how Sun Wukong couldn't escape from Buddha's palm. I would cry, and struggle, and throw a tantrum ... but I'd still be safe and sound in some adult's palm."

"Huh?"

Yumi sort of understood, and sort of didn't.

"Even Noriko told me that. "Since you're in this small place, you can't see the big things," she said."

They thanked the lady for the meal and returned the trays. Then they left the cafeteria, Yumi with her head down trailing Touko-chan.

The hospital buildings were made of wood, and they had the appearance of an 'olden days elementary school' from a movie or commercial. But while the floor retained its original wood coloring, the walls had been painted in bright colors – white, light blue and cherry.

As they walked down the corridors, from time to time a voice would call out to them, saying, "Touko-san," or, "Young miss." When that happened, Touko-chan would stop and greet the caller, or wave hello. The people that did this were both staff members and patients, and it was further proof that Touko-chan came to visit from time to time, and chatted with the various people.

"Waaaah"

Hearing this crying voice so suddenly, they turned to look and saw an elderly lady holding a six-month old baby in a sunny corner of a common room. A young couple, apparently the baby's parents, were beside her smiling happily. They were probably saying something along the lines of, "If you get well soon, you can come and visit your grandchild." Although, it may even have been her great-grandchild.

Touko-chan smiled happily too. They stopped and watched for a while, it was the kind of blessed scene that Yumi could watch forever.

"Shall we go?"

At Touko-chan's prompting, they left. They temporarily exited the hospital grounds and walked alongside a road through the woods. From memory, Touko-chan had said that she was going to show Yumi around the area. However, it didn't feel as though they were walking aimlessly. Touko-chan strode as though she had a definite goal. Yumi followed silently, wondering if there was some famous location nearby.

How long had they been walking? It was probably after they'd been walking for about 15 or 20 minutes that Touko-chan stopped.

"Sixteen years ago, there was a car crash."

"A car crash?"

Yumi took a closer look at her surroundings. The country road was properly paved, and it made a gentle curve as it followed the mountain around. Visibility didn't seem that bad –

"See how the branches that overhang the road are all the same length? I don't know the exact spot, but I'm sure it was somewhere around here."

At the time of the accident, they were probably much thicker. Had they been cut back as a result of the accident?

"It was a collision between a truck and a car, and the married couple in the front seats of the car died. A baby was sleeping in a child seat on the back seat of the car, and that child alone was rescued unharmed."

Where was this story going to end? Yumi's heart beat faster. She was scared to hear what happened next. But she couldn't stop Touko-chan.

Why did Touko-chan look so pained? Her right hand was shaking slightly as she used it to clasp her left hand to her chest. It was something she had to say, she was willing to go to that extent. Yumi had to listen.

"About the size of the baby from before, ... no, at one month old, I was probably even smaller."

"Huh?"

"The baby that was rescued. That child was me."

– Ahh.

Yumi grasped Touko-chan's hand and, still holding hands, embraced her. She didn't know if it was the right thing to do, but she wouldn't have been able to stop herself from doing it anyway.

Touko-chan's body stiffened, but with the addition of Yumi's strength, her closed heart had been unwrapped.

The door had been opened from the other side. The illusion had been dispelled.

Touko-chan was probably crying, but because Yumi was holding her so tightly she couldn't see her face. But she kept talking, as though feverish.

"I've lost my parents once already."

"That's enough."

Yumi said. Since the story was so painful to Touko-chan, there was no need to go further. However, Touko-chan shook her head.

"No, please hear me out."

Still not enough. It looked like there was more she had to say.

"When my parents died, the only family member left was my father's elderly mother. That grandmother was a patient at this hospital."

When she said this, Touko-chan extricated herself from Yumi's grasp and turned to look at the hospital, the Matsudaira Mountain Base Hospital.

"She was in no position to raise me. So she decided to send me to an orphanage, but just before that happened the Matsudaira family took me in and adopted me. Mrs Matsudaira had been pregnant a number of times, but had never brought a child to term. Even at that time, she was recuperating at her father-in-law's hospital after suffering through the heartache of miscarriage. So it seemed like deliverance."

The mother that had lost a child from her womb, and the child that had lost both parents in an accident, together they could provide the parts each had lost and start a family. That sort of thing.

"Mother Matsudaira is this person."

Touko-chan took out the photo from before and showed it to Yumi again. The girl with the same hairstyle as Touko-chan. Even though Yumi

had thought they looked so much alike, apparently they weren't blood related at all.

"And this person."

After pointing out 'Mother Matsudaira,' Touko-chan shifted her finger across two people, to another smiling young girl.

"This person is the woman that gave birth to me."

"Huh ... so, then – "

"Quite the coincidence, isn't it. They were classmates back in high school."

With her short-cut hairdo, Touko-chan's birth mother didn't really look much like her, although there seemed to be some faint resemblances around the brow. However, it was such a small photograph that it was hard to tell for sure.

"I only found out about this recently. But I've known that I wasn't the Matsudaira's child for a long time. My parents were always careful not to mention anything, but some insensitive adults, probably thinking I was just a kid, talked about my bloodline in front of me, and others who weren't aware of the situation would comment that I didn't look like either of my parents. Because of all those things, I started to wonder about it when I was still just a child. When I was smart enough, I looked at the family register and knew."

At one time or another, everyone harbors doubts about whether they are their parents child, but to have the proof thrust in front of her must have been quite a shock.

"My birth mother was apparently an actress in a small troupe. When I found that out, I thought about quitting acting. But then I thought that if I quit suddenly, my parents might attach too much significance to it."

Yumi thought that Touko-chan was the one who had been attaching too much significance to things.

"I love my current parents dearly. So I never once wanted to swap them for my deceased parents. But I've hurt them. My parents agreed with my

grandfather about the hospital. I told them, "You don't need someone like me anymore then." Even though, up until that point, they didn't know that I knew. After that, my mother started to unravel a bit. She has nightmares, and calls out about her baby being taken away from her."

"I see ... "

This must be 'Touko-chan's secret' that Kashiwagi-san mentioned. Even though he'd offered to tell Yumi, it really wasn't something she should have heard from him.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I want you to know everything, Yumi-sama. That's why I've told you."

That's why Touko-chan had asked Yumi to hold off on her response. She wanted Yumi to decide only after hearing everything.

(Are you ready to deal with that blow?)

Kashiwagi-san's words came back to her. Yumi took a short breath and shook off the illusion.

Regardless of any kind of blow, Touko-chan had chosen to confide in Yumi. How could she refuse?

No, it wasn't even at that level any more. Yumi had obtained her petit soeur.

As long as Touko-chan was Touko-chan, everything was fine.

When set in front of that resolution, any argument about dealing or not dealing with a blow was completely meaningless.

When Tomorrow Comes

Part 1.

"How about we go with: I was initially on a date with Ami-san, but then after lunch we accidentally ran into her classmate Chiho-san, who had come to school, by chance, to pick up something she'd forgotten, and we joined company."

After eating lunch, Shimako's group held a strategy meeting.

So call it a substitution, or a replacement. While Shimako accepted that she hadn't been on a date with the real Igawa Ami-san from the start, thinking about it from the general student's point of view, that wouldn't have been the end of it.

Shimako's personal opinion was that submitting a completely honest report would make for interesting reading. But if they did that, it seemed likely that Ami-san and Chiho-san would get blamed for breaking the rules. They were forbidden from transferring the card, or its accompanying privileges.

"Okay? Chiho-san can write the first half, and Ami-san can write the second half of the report."

That way, there would be at least some consistency. While they were perhaps deceiving the readers of the Lillian Kwaraban, it was necessary to bring things to a close. Since Shimako had really believed that Chiho-san was 'Ami-san' for the first half, it wasn't a complete lie – just an expedient.

"Oh?"

As she was cutting the cheesecake, the creaking sounds of someone climbing the stairs could be heard.

"?"

Who would be coming to visit the Rose Mansion on a Sunday? The three girls looked at each other. They had already finished their meeting, so their wasn't the sudden tumult of papers being hidden. However, they did look a bit like they'd been caught in the act.

Knock knock, creak. Without waiting for a response, the biscuit door opened.

"Heyoo. Photography club here, do we have any takers?"

"Huh ... ?"

In strode Takeshima Tsutako-san. Following behind her, more subdued, was her junior from the photography club, Naitou Shouko-chan. They were both in school uniform.

"What's going on?"

Shimako set the cake knife down and walked over to them.

"Oh, it's Shimako-san. Hmm, I didn't imagine you'd be doing the same thing two years in a row, so I was certain it was going to be Yumi-san or Yoshino-san."

Tsutako-san's eyes were still wide from the surprise of seeing someone unexpected. That made two of them.

As a start, the new and old visitors greeted each other with "Gokigenyou." Then Shimako returned to her task of cutting the cake, and they all ate. Tsutako-san and Shouko-chan were initially reluctant, but since Chiho-san was there as well they decided to join in. Three's the same as five, in other words.

"Well. As I was walking through the courtyard, I saw the window was open. I thought someone might be there, or it could just be that they forgot to close it yesterday, in which case I should close it for them. But then I was worried that someone might be there, after all. I didn't want to interfere with their date, but maybe I could take a commemorative photo for them. Of course, I'd keep it a secret from the newspaper club."

Tsutako-san winked as she gestured with the fork she'd used to transport the cheesecake to her mouth.

"That sounds reasonable enough. But why are you at school in the first place?"

Shimako asked, as she closed the window. She knew there were a number of clubs at the school today, but she hadn't expected the photography club would be one of them.

"At Katsura-san's request, I came to take photos of the tennis club. She said they wanted to give their graduating seniors a handmade booklet with photos of them doing club activities. Which they'd all sign. For various reasons, it was better doing it today than before or after school, plus the weather report said it would be sunny."

Then after coming to school on Sunday and looking around, she saw that there were numerous other sports and cultural clubs holding activities, so she went from place to place taking photographs.

"Shall we get them to take a photo of us too?"

Shimako asked Ami-san and Chiho-san, and was met with resounding approval. Apparently these two first-years had a special yearning to have their photos taken by Takeshima Tsutako-san.

"What's the magic word?"

Tsutako-san asked, holding up her camera.

"Cheesecake's 'cheese'."

Just as Chiho-san said this, the shutter clicked.

"Ah."

At that moment, Shimako suddenly remembered.

"Chiho-san, on the day of the treasure hunt, you visited this room, didn't you?"

She didn't stay long, but she was definitely there. Although, rather than saying she visited it was more like she burst in and then ran off, like a coastal squall.

"I remember ... you said something about finding Shimako-sama's 'shi.'"

Lots of students converged on Shimako's location as they tried to reassemble her hint.

"That's incredible, Rosa Gigantea. That you could remember my face from out of that sea of chaos."

Chiho-san giggled. But, in that case, Chiho-san must possess an enormous amount of courage. To impersonate someone from the absentee's chance draw after she'd put herself in a position to be seen during the treasure hunt itself.

"Is that right?"

However, Chiho-san shook her head, "No, it's not."

"Actually, it was Shimako-sama's 'ma.'"

– Right.

Part 2.

It started with them taunting the animals with it, and ended with them screaming it from atop a pedestrian walkway: "Rei-chan you damn idiot!"

Both Chisato-san and Yoshino were completely overwriting the events of last year's date with today's.

"That was fun. Really."

Chisato-san said as she tightly grasped Yoshino's hand in front of the K station ticket gate. It was a handshake.

"I don't mean to be rude to Rei-sama, but it was much better than last year. Back then, it felt like the me that I was projecting was a fake. But this year, it was the real me, so I think that's why I could enjoy it so fully."

"So, you're saying that you didn't feel like you had to take into account my wants?"

"Yep. But that's a good thing, right?"

"... If you say so."

Yoshino thought, "Well, whatever." It wasn't as though she hadn't enjoyed herself either.

Hiding her fear behind laughter in the horror movie, eating her flop of a lunch, looking at the animals, and screaming out loud.

No, it was much more fun. So much so, that they found it hard to part after their time together. Which explained her slip of the tongue.

"Chisato-san. Why don't we go and see Rei-chan now?"

"Alright."

Despite the unexpected nature of the request, Chisato-san replied immediately.

"I thought something was missing. And you're right, Rei-sama. My revenge won't be complete without making a joyous report to Rei-sama."

Chisato-san was getting quite excited about the prospect, overawing the person who invited her.

"Hold on a minute."

Let's calm down and think about this.

"What?"

"Sorry, I forgot. You have a commuter pass, so you're fine, but I'm 10 yen short."

Since she was 10 yen short, she couldn't take the bus.

"Oh, but didn't you say you were going to pay that yourself?"

"Yeah, but."

That had been her original intention. But, how to put this, she was reluctant to fudge the numbers of their date while it was still alive. In other words, she'd been willing to pay 210 yen of her own money to get home, since it didn't feel right to be stingy when they had 200 yen left, but Yoshino had been contemplating fooling Chisato-san into thinking she was catching a bus, and then walking home. Of course, she was completely unconcerned that Chisato-san was going to write in the report that she rode her bike. The important thing was the question of her feelings.

"Hmm. Well, let's go then. I'll walk you to Rei-sama's house."

"Huh? How far do you think it is?"

How many bus stops was it? Yoshino counted on her fingers as she thought. Was it eight or nine? No, wait, she couldn't recall all of the names of the stops, so that would make it at least ten.

"But Yoshino-san, it's not so far that you can't do it, right? I thought you'd be all for it. Plus, I can just get the bus back easily enough."

Brandishing her commuter pass, Chisato-san quickly walked off.

"Geeze."

If that's the way she wants it, that's the way she'll get it.

Sometimes playing shiritori word games, sometimes riddles, sometimes skipping, and occasionally singing, they passed the bus stations one by one.

By the time they arrived at the bus station in front of Lillian's Girls Academy, an entire hour had passed.

They'd followed the bus route the entire way. Rei-chan would probably know a safe short-cut, but Yoshino studiously avoided that so she wouldn't

get lost in some unfamiliar street. Even Chisato-san only knew the commuter routes, from K station to school, and from M station to school. At any rate, she knew how to get to home (Hasekura) from here, but they had to cross the road using the pedestrian overpass.

Looking down at the school grounds from that height, there were so many trees that it almost looked like a small forest. If it looked like this in winter, when all the deciduous plants had lost their leaves, then surely it must look absolutely stunning in summer.

"Are you getting caught up in your emotions?"

Chisato-san tapped Yoshino on the shoulder. Those who take this bridge on their way to school every day must grow accustomed to the view.

"Mmmm."

How to put this feeling into words?

"It's like, when you see something familiar from a slightly different angle."

And you realize once more that you love it.

As Yoshino was wondering if she was going to get laughed at for saying something so out of character, Chisato-san stood next to her and said, "Yeah."

They watched the bus to M station finally arrive.

From their position atop the walkway, they saw a group of students running towards it.

Simultaneously, they both called out different names.

"Shimako-san?"

"Tsutako-san?"

When they heard what the other had said, they said, "Huh?" and looked again. However, the group had already been swallowed up and the bus departed. There was no chance to confirm it.

There were a number of other students who got on the bus too. Maybe they hadn't been doing anything together, however –

"Why would Shimako-san and Tsutako-san be with each other?"

On top of that, at school.

No matter how much she thought about it, Yoshino couldn't come up with an answer. She bunched her hand into a fist and raised it high above her head.

"Tomorrow, I'm definitely going to ask Shimako-san about it."

She looked forward to the coming of tomorrow.

Part 3.

"I used to hate you, Yumi-sama."

Touko-chan mumbled.

"Cheerful, innocent, a face that would show everything, but was never muddled."

After saying farewell to Touko-chan's grandfather, they left the hospital at about 3pm. As expected, they took the courtesy bus back to the train station, then set about retracing their route to get back home. Currently, they were being gently rocked by the train.

"No, I get as ... muddled ... as anyone else."

Yumi responded.

"I know that now."

"Ah, right."

After their visit to the scene of the accident, Touko-chan had been quite meek, but she suddenly came out with the 'hate' punch. Plus, she'd confirmed Yumi's muddled status. The normal response would be to say, "That's not what I meant at all," but there didn't look as though there was going to be any follow-up. Still, compared to a withering flower, one that bared its thorns as it bloomed was far more Touko-chan-esque, Yumi thought as she sat to the left of her, feeling her warmth.

"Someone who never gets muddled isn't really all that human."

Touko-chan smiled briefly, then said:

"Which is why I thought I definitely wanted to be like you, Yumi-sama. I wanted to be like you, even though I couldn't be. Because of that, I became jealous, annoyed, and hostile. I thought it'd be better if you weren't near me. But you methodically broke down all the walls I frantically put up, and kept coming."

"Please don't make me sound like some kind of monster."

"But it's true."

Touko-chan said, defiantly. She was one of the villagers frantically trying to flee the monster.

"Then that rumor started that I was a candidate to be your petit soeur."

This line she spat out, as though it had been an immense bother.

In early summer, when Sachiko-sama took a short break from school, Touko-chan had been asked to assist the school council. Also around that time, she'd been part of their performance for the school festival and was constantly visiting the Rose Mansion, which led to the rumor. Either way, Yumi had been the one to initiate both events. Yumi reflected upon how much of an inconvenience it must have been for Touko-chan.

"Everyone was just making things up. I'd never considered such a ludicrous outcome."

Touko-chan's voice rose in agitation, so Yumi took the flask from Touko-chan's bag, poured some tea into the lid and offered it to her. They'd refilled it before they left the hospital, so it was still hot.



" ... Well, I suppose I may have thought about it once or twice."

Touko-chan said softly after taking a sip of tea.

"You always wanted to become like the Roses, didn't you Touko-chan?"

That vague yearning to get closer to those lovely, kind seniors who could do anything. The pure thought that she could be like that. Yumi was the same. So she knew.

"They used that rumor to good effect. Even though it was nothing like that. Even though you hated me, they said. In my mind, I desperately tried to rebut them. Which was why I only did things that would make you hate me. But instead, I kept finding myself drawn to you. Even though I knew I shouldn't, I wanted to go to you, I wanted to, and couldn't stop myself. So once more, I ran away."

Running, running, so she wouldn't be caught up in the rumor.

"But even though I ran frantically, you yourself abruptly asked me, "Won't you be my petit soeur?" I couldn't comprehend it."

"I'm sorry."

Yumi said to Touko-chan. She wasn't sure if an apology was appropriate at that point, but it was the only way to get in.

Touko-chan was angry at Yumi. Angry at the students who had thoughtlessly propagated the rumor. At the gears that didn't turn properly. At the fate she couldn't escape from. And she continued to be angry with herself.

In that case, more anger was welcome.

More, more. She should raise her voice, let her temper flare, stamp her feet and cry out.

She should let everything that she'd silently been keeping bottled up inside her come out.

Tell me all the complaints that you have, Yumi thought.

Take all the time on the train, and on the bus, all the way to M station. If that's not enough, then there's tomorrow and the next day. We can meet each day at lunch, and you can list them all, one after the other.

Who cares if everyone else is shocked. Or if they poke fun. Let them say whatever they want.

Because Yumi and Touko-chan were to become soeurs.

Once she'd let it all out, they'd fill those empty spaces with happy memories.

Like Yumi had with Sachiko-sama. As time goes by, the tough times and the sad times, as well as all the happy times, will all get rolled up together.

Soon they would be arriving at M station.

"Touko-chan?"

Either the tension had been released or she was tired from talking, for Touko-chan was peacefully dozing beside Yumi.

Outside the window, it was darker than when they boarded the bus.

Something made a clinking sound when they went round an intersection.

Was it the coins that remained in the envelope from their date money?

Or was it the rosary in Yumi's pocket?

It was a tiny, cute sound, like something whispering.

(She wants to wait until after our date for a response.)

Today's mystery tour would be completed after they went down that familiar road and returned to their starting point, M station.

(Wait just a little while longer.)

Yumi reached her hand into her pocket and gently caressed the rosary.

Tomorrow, they'd go to school.

And then.